

THE PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE BOLOGNA PROCESS IMPLEMENTATION: COMPARING RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE TO UKRAINE AND ARMENIA

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Abstract. The problems connected with joining the Bologna higher education reform has caused many contradictive debates, which continue after more than ten years after the signing the Bologna agreement by Russian Federation. Many researchers paid sufficient attention to the analysis of the Bologna process features. The current study focuses on the perceptions and attitudes of senior academic staff of one University in Russian Federation towards the Bologna implementation. This aspect was chosen in order to conduct the empirical study that involves the opinion of the driving force of the changes connected with Bologna reform, deans of faculties in Higher Educational Institution. The participants of the study, twelve deans in one University, were interviewed and gave their opinion related to this problem. The collected data was analyzed and compared to existing research carried out by the scholars from the post-Soviet space countries, Ukrain and Armenia, in order to find correlations and contradictions in the perceived changes and their outcomes.

Keywords: higher education; higher education reform; educational policy; educational change.

Introduction

The Bologna Process is a highly significant reform that has triggered a chain of national level reforms in higher education [1: 10]. The Bologna Process “has arguably become the most significant and transformative higher education reform process in history” [2: 5]. It was commonly accepted that Russian higher education has radically changed its origin, character and its cultural background, which was formed during post-Soviet period.

The most significant responsibility in coping with the Bologna reform was given to leadership, as driving force to implement and institutionalize change [3]. Leaders, responsible for implementation of the Bologna features throughout Russian HEIs, were deans of faculties in the universities.

Previous research in Russian context did not explain the effects of Higher education reform on the work of this senior academic staff. However, the researchers from Ukraine [4, 5] and Armenia [6] conducted the empirical studies, analysing the perceptions of University staff towards the changes brought by the Bologna reform. The context of Ukrainian and Armenian HEIs can be regarded as similar to Russian system of Higher education, because Universities in these countries shared the same policies and practices as the Russian Federation during the Soviet period. That is why the experi-

ence of other countries can be regarded as comparable to Russian. Through looking at the issues surrounding implementation and the Bologna Process in a variety of contexts, we could build a picture of the issues and opinions, which emerged. The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of senior academic staff, as driving force to implement and institutionalize change, towards the Bologna reform and to address the findings in comparison with the results of researchers from other countries.

Perceptions of the Bologna Process impact - Post-Soviet space context

This section is focused on the experience of some countries of post-Soviet space, such as Ukraine and Armenia, because they have common roots with the Russian Federation. Their educational systems are similar to Russian, because during a long period of time these countries shared the same traditions and Higher education is not an exception. Both, Ukraine and Armenia, joined the Bologna process in 2005, two years later than Russia, however, these countries were obliged to finish the implementation of the Bologna features by 2010, as well as the Russian Federation [7]. These countries implemented the Bologna reform in a similar way as it was done in Russia that is why they can be regarded as comparable. It was thought to be beneficial to analyse the similarities and differences between the reaction to changes among different countries.

1. Ukrainian context. Kovtun and Stick [4] conducted a study of the impact of the Bologna Process on Ukrainian state institutions. They interviewed members of academic staff in one pedagogical Ukrainian university and divided their attitudes about Bologna Process into three categories: 1) Bologna Process implementation shortcomings; 2) perceived advantages; 3) perceived disadvantages. In the first category they identified: a) centralized administration; b) insufficient training; c) insufficient resources; and d) participants' attachment to the old system. Regarding perceived advantages they mentioned: a) students' increased mobility and employability; b) the development of autonomous learners. Perceived disadvantages included: a) decreased quality of education; and b) loss of tradition.

Regarding the Bologna Process implementation shortcomings, Kovtun and Stick mentioned the challenges connected with the *centralized administration* of higher education represented by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine. In this case academic staff were dissatisfied with the top-down approach, because it suppresses autonomy and motivation of the academic staff. "Lacked clarity, consistency, and precision of instruction" [4: 94], resulted in poor and vague conception of the reform. Lack of explanation was given and supported by orders, regarding the Bologna reform, which again resulted in partially misconception of duties among staff. Moreover, participants faced inadequate understanding of the new processes and high pressure

to implement changes in the context of structure, curricular and methods of assessment. Some of the participants claimed that they joined Bologna Process as it was written in the law and the decision of reform and the way to implement it was made for them. The top-down, partially authoritarian way to implement reforms led to resistance among members of staff, was risky to use, as it could cause failure of the educational change [8].

As it is clear from the findings [4] as the implementation of reform seemed to be rushed it resulted in *insufficient training*, lacked appropriate planning and training of key staff. Despite the fact that some training classes were organized for instructors of different departments, the effect of this training was not good and it did not help, because responsibilities were not clearly defined.

The results [Ibid.] revealed that *insufficient resources*: financial support and technological equipment negatively affected the implementation of Bologna Process and perceptions of staff towards the reform. The discrepancy between the effort to follow modern higher education requirements and poor technologies and resources resulted in an obstacle to achieve key component of the Bologna Process - the development of autonomous learners. In fact, the authorities of HEI faced need to expand library resources, improve access to the new technologies. The development of independent learning skills, including self-reflection and self-assessment was perceived as dependent on these resources. Unfortunately, issues connected with funding resulted in negative perceptions of academic staff.

Participants' attachment to the old system has been revealed by the Ukrainian researchers [Ibid.] as essential barrier to the successful implementation of higher education reform. The interviewees expressed fear that new coming changes and system transformations would ruin national traditions and values. In fact, the staff was worried because during the implementation no attention was paid to the culture of organization and its traditions. Moreover, some of the participants were straightforward, stating that new Western system destroys Ukrainian education and damages previous approaches. However, some participants showed their readiness to improve in order not to lose the best achievements of their national education. These results can be regarded as change of habitus [9], and that is explanation of such negative perceptions of academic staff. *Loss of tradition*, as participants perceive the situation with implementation of higher education reform, resulted in deprivation of their independent decisions and thoughts.

Decreased quality of education was seen as the major perceived disadvantage of the Bologna Process in results of study of this study [4]. This is connected to the shortage of class hours and a greater emphasis on students' independent work.

In four years Shaw et al. conducted a study of academic staff at a Ukrainian university in a framework of organizational culture in the adop-

tion of the Bologna process. This study investigates the impacts of Bologna Process and perceptions of it in a slightly different way. The ways in which the cultural beliefs and assumptions of instructional staff in Ukraine served as filters for new educational innovations introduced since Bologna were explored [5]. They “paid particular attention to aspects of the Bologna Process that were recognized by faculty as most troubling, and those they found easiest to accommodate” [Ibid.: 992]. They interviewed 40 members of staff, supporting their research with open system model [10] of organization culture and work on the stages of innovation [11]. Their research [5] was based on idea [10], that organizations will develop without providing additional incentives, in the case if their members believe the new directions to be right and compelling.

Moreover, they supported it in a framework of a model [11] of the diffusion of innovation, which includes five characteristics. These included: 1) relative advantage, or the degree to which the new idea is seen as better than its predecessor; 2) compatibility, which is the extent to which it is seen as compatible with current values and needs; 3) complexity, or the perceived level of difficulty involved in understanding or using the innovation; 4) trialability, or the extent to which there is opportunity to experiment with the innovation on a limited scale; and 5) observability, which is the degree to which the benefits of the new idea are visible to others. Conducting their research through these perspectives, Shaw et al. concluded that a top-down implementation of Bologna process in Ukraine often placed faculty in a position of working hard to learn new methods, cope with reforms and innovations. It is important that in Russian context the top-down approach as well was used to implement the Bologna Process. These changes, given hierarchy, the pay structure and the culture of the University, which were imposed on the Ukrainian staff, were more relevant for Western European context. This resonates with situation in Russia, because, features of the Bologna reform were more suitable for the context of European Union [12].

Shaw et al. divided their findings into two parts: 1) ***Faculty beliefs about their professional work*** (including rates at *sources of job motivation*; sources of job satisfaction; sources of job frustration; beliefs about salaries; changing nature of demands; beliefs related to research; beliefs about job security); 2) ***Beliefs about the Bologna process***, where were presented the rates on the *significant changes (positive and negative) brought by Bologna*. Summarizing their findings, it is revealed that 74% of the interviewees are frustrated because of insufficient salaries, 49% feel the same because of lack time for research but the increased pressure to do research, which was mentioned by 85% of staff members. Moreover, 74% of the respondents stated that Bologna process creates a lot of new pressures, 82% are expected to do more research, 59% are expected to do more paperwork and administrative work. However, they mention and positive changes: module system is re-

garded so by 49% of respondents, greater international legitimacy (38%); grading system and greater flexibility both were mentioned as positive by 41% of interviewees. Concluding their study, Shaw et al. state that their findings have a significance in “those contexts in higher education, where efforts at innovation in higher education intersects with strong organizational cultures” [5: 1002].

The results of study of Kovtun and Stick and Shaw et al. correlate in some aspects. The researchers highlight that the reform has been implemented in top-down fashion and the academic staff had to fit into the coming changes. Both these papers admit the change of previous traditions and approaches to providing services of Higher education. Some of the participants in both these studies have negative experience in changing the organizational culture, which was habitual to institutions for a long time. However, these studies have some contradictions, results of Kovtun and Stick revealed negative reaction of the participants towards the effect of European influence on the Higher education system and processes. Meanwhile, Shaw et al. revealed that some of the participants are positive about international legitimacy. The study [4] has more indicators and aspects of the academic staff perceptions towards the Bologna reform, such as the perceptions of more paper work, pressure on the research activities, sources of teachers’ motivation and problems with salary.

2. Armenian context. Karakhanyan et al. [6] conducted a study of eight leading Higher education institutions and how they have adapted to the political directive to create alignment with the Bologna principles. They support the idea that changes in Western Europe are aimed at the improvement of higher education and these changes are doubly challenging for post-Soviet countries with their different traditions in education and political, constitutional, and cultural contexts [13]. The research involved teachers in HEI in Armenia. According to the Bologna Agreement, higher education reform included integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the construction of a modern model of quality assurance, accreditation, implementation of European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), diploma supplement and three-tier academic degree structure. A questionnaire [6] was meant to explore five concepts: a) change knowledge; b) beliefs about organizational culture; c) beliefs about changes; d) emotions about reforms; e) reflections regarding reform implementation.

Concerning the first concept, *change knowledge*, the results showed that 97.5% of the respondents “agreed with statements suggesting a high capacity to be engaged in the change process and a readiness to build on this capacity” [Ibid.: 77].

A majority of respondents, around 86% mentioned that the meaning of the changes, brought by Bologna Process, is to promote quality of education in its dimensions, such as teaching and learning, management and organiza-

tion and assessment of student achievement. Unfortunately, around 10% of interviewees revealed the absence of any idea of what the reform was about. Moreover, around half of the participants stated that there was a lack of appropriate background for reform implementation and around 16% mentioned the insufficient awareness of the reforms. In this case, the results of Kovtun and Stick correlate with the findings of Karakhanyan: academic staff face the lack of information, guidance on reform, lack of clear policy directives and experience unclear picture of the reform aims. Smaller number of respondents (14%) mentioned that academic staff are not ready to face the challenge and do not have relevant competence knowledge and skills for this. Some of the interviewees (13%) mentioned the fast pace of the reforms and a neglect of previous traditions, which were also mentioned [4]. Supporting their Ukrainian colleagues [4, 5], Karakhanyan et al. found that a quarter of the participants are not satisfied with curricular changes and claim about their inefficiency. Armenian HEI faced the reduction of face-to-face hours and neglecting some important subjects for some specialties, which is similar to Ukrainian and Russian situations. In addition, 62% of the respondents believe that the approaches promoted by Bologna do not fit well with the existing system, as “they are degrading the education provided during Soviet times” [6: 81]. Moreover, 45% of the participants claimed that the Western reformatations brought strong decrease of educational criteria and their standards. As a result, Armenian higher education system faced loss of tradition as well as Ukrainian one.

Regarding *teachers' beliefs and emotions within the organizational culture*, almost 78% of the respondents stated that their organizational environment was unfavorable for reform implementation. Around a quarter of the respondents argued about the incapacity of the top management to handle the on-going reforms, and that reforms were simply being imposed on them adding that they were hardly involved in the reforms process. Academic staff was unsatisfied because they were not properly informed and actors who occupy managing positions barely consulted with them on any policy undertaken. They claim to receive direct orders to implement activities they have little knowledge about. Top-down fashion in conducting reforms and changes is resulted in negative perceptions of staff. However, 86% of academic staff showed the necessity of the reformation of Higher Education, but they represented their beliefs that the previous traditions and practices could be preserved in some way. A small number of interviewees showed the disagreement with the suggestion about keeping Soviet practices. In a case of *emotions about reforms*, 90% of the academic staff expressed their disappointment regarding the change process.

Some of the respondents note the lack of resources, which brings significant issues to the process of implementation of multi-dimensional reform, Bologna Process. Moreover, some of the academic staff, which took

part in a research [6] noted that students are neither ready nor motivated enough to get involved in student-centered education. Summing up these findings and results of Ukrainian researchers, it can be concluded that there are numerous common features and issues concerning this Higher education reform. Unfortunately, the research of this problems is limited, however similarities can be found and analyzed in addition with the experience of the colleagues from Western Europe. In the following chapter the attitude of Russian researchers, policymakers, academics, professors and teachers is going to be analyzed in order to find similar or different features.

Research methodology

The researcher of this study was interested in how senior academic staff in one Russian university perceived the Higher education reform brought by the Bologna Process. The qualitative case study was chosen as methodology approach for this research, because current study was investigating the case of one particular University and the particular program. Semi-structured interviews were used as data collection tool, as it enables to get access to beliefs and perceptions [14] of senior academic staff, as deans of faculties, towards the implementation of the Bologna Process.

The University, which was chosen for this case study, is a big University with 100-year history and rich culture, which gives “classic” education. From the establishment of this University provision of Higher education started in one of the largest region in Russian Federation. There are twelve different faculties, in which all the procedures, practices and policies of the Bologna Process have been fully implemented. The faculties are: Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics, Faculty of Physics, Faculty of Chemistry, Faculty of Biology, Faculty of Geology, Faculty of Geography, Faculty of History and Political Science, Faculty of Philology, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Foreign Languages. This University successfully passes all procedures of accreditations, licensing and quality assurance. That is why the experience of this University and its staff is relevant and appropriate in a framework of this research. The study involved twelve participants, deans of these faculties.

Results and discussion

1. Leaders’ perceptions of the Bologna reform and its consequences.

Lack of adequate awareness and training. Most of the participants argued about top-down fashion of the Bologna process, saying that they did not have choice to implement it or not. These results correlate with the findings of the Ukrainian and Armenian researchers [4-6]. Top-down fashion and centralized administration caused heteronomy among academic staff.

The rushed way to implement the reform resulted in insufficient training of the key staff, which as well was noticed in this study and by Kovtun and Stick. Ubiquitous ambiguity in providing information could have been reduced, if obligatory workshops and instructional courses would be arranged for senior academic staff, so they in turn could appropriately inform other members of staff.

Previous system vs the Bologna system. It was revealed in this research that significant amount of professors believed that the Bologna process was not relevant for application to Russian context because of different educational policy ideals, which can be determined by cultural and personal aspects. This tendency was also revealed [6] in their study, and more than half of University staff believed that Bologna did not fit well with the existing system, as it degraded the education provided during Soviet times.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the majority of the participants gave their preference to the previous system. Participants' attachments to old system were also a result of Kovtun and Stick findings, and were determined as a barrier to the successful implementation of Bologna reform. However, the participants of the current study never claimed about loss of tradition and acquired foreign culture, which was emphasized by Kovtun and Stick. On the contrary, some deans were positive about international legitimacy, which was also highlighted by Shaw et al. and the participants were happy to become closer to European colleagues in some aspects, such as academic mobility and ECTS.

Lack of resources. Insufficient resources were one more reason for deans of technical faculties to have negative attitude towards the Bologna process. Ukrainian and Armenian researchers also stated this as a reason for academic staff negative attitudes to implementation of the Bologna. The participants of current research and Ukrainian and Armenian academic staff explained that governments did not provide funding for HEIs for joining the Bologna process. The discrepancy between the effort to follow modern higher education requirements and poor technologies and resources resulted in an obstacle to achieve key component of the Bologna Process - the development of autonomous learners, was noted in current study as well. However, Ukrainian and Armenian studies did not distinguish the types of faculties, which faced lack of governmental funding for high-technological facilities.

2. The Bologna's effect on the work of senior academic staff as professors, researchers and leaders of faculties in terms of new policies and practices.

Motivation of the academic staff. Findings of the current study do not correlate with the findings of Kovtun and Stick and Shaw et al., who stated that issues, connected with the Bologna process, negatively affected the motivation of academic staff. On the contrary, current results showed that deans saved and enhanced their sources of motivation at work by overcoming obstacles. Also, the fact that their motivation was not mercantile, helped them

to cope with changes and overcome obstacles. However, the results of current study correlate with the comment of Show et al. that the most important sources of motivation for academic staff are non-financial.

Everyday work: Research work and audit procedures. The changes in research process requirements the majority of the participants addressed to the influence of originally Russian program, proposed by Ministry of Education and Science. Russian professors did not feel the high pressure on the research process connected directly with the Bologna outcomes, whereas Kovtun and Stick and Show et al. admitted this issue connecting it to the Bologna process outcomes. The pressure existed, but it was not connected with the Bologna process.

Regarding audit procedures, the results revealed dissatisfaction of senior academic staff with the absence of European colleagues involvement in quality assurance procedures. It is important, that no researchers previously mentioned it. That is how professors' expectations of getting impartial assessment by foreign colleague were not met here. However, the results of this study correspond with the findings of Show et al, that participants were frustrated by extensive paper work and bureaucratic part of their job [15].

3. Positive (beneficial) and negative outcomes of the Bologna process: deans' perspective.

Positive outcomes. ECTS was mentioned as a beneficial outcome by some participants during the interview process. Notably, nowhere in previous Ukrainian or Armenian discussion this aspect was mentioned as a positive outcome, from the perspective of staff in HEIs. Advocates of this aspect mentioned that this tool enables better understanding between Russia and other countries, where the system of credits is used. Additionally, it was positive opinion that flexibility of ECTS enables to line up individual educational trajectories that makes education more learner-centered, whereas in the previous system it was impossible.

The possibility of changing the field of education was mentioned as an advantage that was never available in terms of previous system of higher education in Russia. The chance to study another sphere and get Master's qualification in different from Bachelor's professional field. This positive outcome was not mentioned in previous papers of the Armenian and the Ukrainian researchers. Availability of Master's qualifications as a result of in-depth educational programs was admitted by the majority of the participants, seven interviewees. Notably, this aspect was not mentioned in previous research as well. Some participants regarded international legitimacy and closeness to foreign tradition of getting higher education as beneficial result. This aspect resonates only with the findings of Show et al., who also highlighted it as positive outcome, from the perspective of staff in Ukrainian HEIs.

Negative outcomes. The findings of this research revealed that majority of senior academic staff are dissatisfied with the implementation of the institu-

tionalized cycled degree structure. As well the findings revealed dissatisfaction of every participant connected to the shortage of the educational programs for one year and further reduction of curricula. Karakhanyan et al. emphasized this aspect, highlighting that a quarter of their respondents were not satisfied with reduction of face-to-face sessions and important disciplines.

Some participants mentioned decreasing quality of education during the interview process. To this conclusion came both Ukrainian and Armenian researchers. The complex of negative factors: shortage of face-to-face hours and a greater emphasis on students' independent work, formally squeezed curricula and formally updated educational programs, reduction of one academic year from the previous system, reduction of important disciplines in order to fit into four years of education, resulted in decreased quality of the graduates. Moreover, the Governments did not address these factors. The curricula makers were limited by the frameworks to transform 5-year educational programs into 4-year programs. This negative outcome was mentioned in the papers of other researchers.

Conclusion

The key aim of this study was to look at the Bologna process, one of the most significant higher education reforms in a history of Russian education tradition from the perspective of senior academic staff in a Russian university. In this area of investigation regarding perceptions of the Bologna process, there was lack of systematic empirical Russian research. For this reason, the similar experiences of post-Soviet space countries were taken into account, the experiences of the Ukrainian and Armenian professors and academic staff in HEIs. This experience was close to Russian, because these countries are located on the post-Soviet space, as well as Russia, and from the Soviet period countries shared the same roots and traditions as the Russian Federation.

The results of current study correspond with the research of the Ukrainian and Armenian researchers in terms of lack of adequate awareness and training of the leaders of the faculty, noted preferences of the previous system of higher education, admitted lack of appropriate resources.

However, in some aspects current results contradict with the findings of the researchers from Ukraine and Armenia. The current study did not confirm issues with motivation of the academic staff, which were admitted by other researchers; also the participants of this study did not refer the changes with their scientific work and audit procedures to the Bologna process outcomes. Additionally, participants mentioned ECTS as a positive feature of the Bologna implementation, while it was never stated in any of the previous papers.

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