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ECTS & DS Labels Keys for Academic Excellence

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present an assessment of the importance of how and what are the actual results after the higher education institutions have had designed the credits system in direct relations with their own characteristics. Also is important to identify and analyze how are the effects after the ultimate design of students guides and if those effects are bringing with them better feedback in terms of increasing number of cohorts of students. With this research paper we intend to make an overview of the results after this changes (re-design the curriculum, ECTS credit system, new learning modules, better, flexible and comprehensive students guides) making the institutions more close to excellence in education and get ready for the ECTS & DS Labels – awarded by the European Commission. All of those institutional changes can be measured in the final stage by an very actual indicator like the attainment and completion rates as well as by the labor market prospects of graduates.

Keywords: ECTS; Diploma Supplement; students; higher education institutions

1. Actual Situation of European Higher Education Area

All European countries have realized significant structural changes, facilitating that all European Higher Education Area rose to a new level that facilitates to a better response to all the new societal demands.

This is the new ground floor for the new objectives that will be in placed for the new development strategy for 2020. All those changes couldn't be possible to be achieved by today if the voluntary cooperation of all 47 European countries was stimulated the – a success story by now- Bologna Process.

This initiative provided a European framework and modernizes in order to concentrate all common efforts to reform and up-grade the higher education system.

The Bologna reform agenda specify a large dimension of the new European higher education area.

The most important 5 action lines that are in the Bologna declaration are related to the:

- easy readable and comparable degrees (through diploma supplement tool);
- establishment of a credit system (European Credit Transfer System);
- promotion of mobility;
- quality assurance;
- European dimension (joint and double degrees).

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What we consider important is that the impact of the reform emerged through Bologna Process is not limited only to the countries participating in the programs financed by European Commission, but also through Tempus program that supports educational reforms in 27 Tempus countries, inside and outside of the Europe.

Starting with the most important aim of Bologna Declaration – that adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees which is dedicated to promote European people employability and above the international competitiveness of the European higher education system we can appreciate that before with the adoption of Bologna declaration in 1999, in Europe were a large variety of higher education systems like : bachelor system of four-six years, in some cases finalized with a diploma that was equivalent with master’s degree in other systems. Through Bologna process, is was made the base for adoption by the member states a system clearly defined by two cycles – bachelor and master, in which the access for master studies was made after the student finalized his/her studies in a bachelor period of minimum of three years.

Starting with ministers conference from Berlin in 2005, it was made the basement for integration is this “Bologna System” the research “component” of the third cycle – the doctoral program. But the bridge towards implementation a wide integrated common platform – composed by the tree cycles– was the presence of three very important tools – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, the Diploma Supplement and the requirements for a national qualification framework.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System was stipulated in the Bologna Declaration¹ (1999)“as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility” focused on the objective that universities have to assign credits to foreign students which have had a mobility for study/placement in the respective higher education institution.

The next “Bologna tool”, Diploma Supplement was introduced by European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO in 1990s. This is a standardized template which contains many descriptors about the current status of students like: nature of studies, level and context and the finished studies that the student completed. This document was introduced in this large higher education area with the main objective of increasing transparency of education. According to the treaty of ministers in Berlin (2005), all the graduates should receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge.

Finally, the third tool, that was introduced by Bologna Process, is the national qualification framework. This new tool has its main objective to describe and clearly express the specifications between the qualifications in all cycles of education.

2. European Curricular Reform

We intend now to give a more closer look to the issues of curricular reform in European Higher Education Area with a special highlight on its key issues: learning outcomes, curricular design, employability and higher education institutions as “open learning centres”.

Regarding learning outcomes as a result of a successful European qualification framework, they should give comprehensibility and diversity at EU and national level.

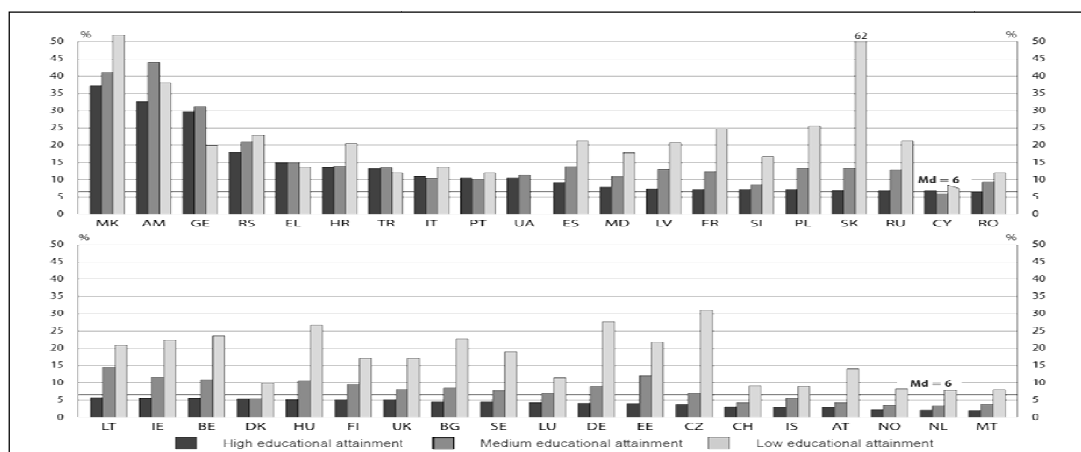
The implementations of National Qualification Frameworks should receive a special attention in order to highlight what descriptors is defined to characterize learning outcomes and competences for separate levels and disciplines. Regarding curricular design we appreciate that the first innovative examples of higher education European cooperation are the joint and double degrees which we consider the base for future development of European education area. Another idea is that, until now, it was made a lot of efforts by all stakeholders in order to reach a balance between what is necessary to teach and what can be individually learned, which can have benefits in reducing study durations and high drop-out rates among students.

¹ The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999.

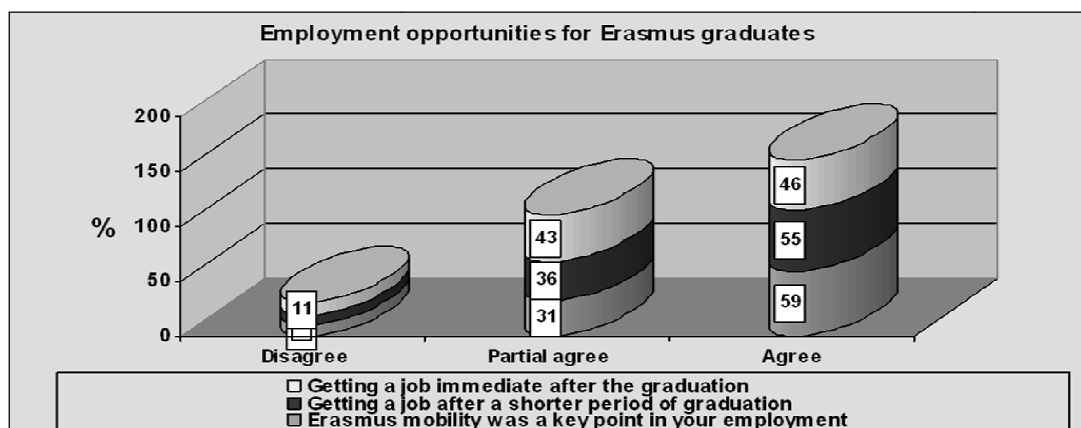
Another, key issue that we want to underline is the problem of graduates employability. In order to increase this number, is necessary to give special attention to the cooperation between universities – professional associations and employers. Few years ago, theirs involvement in curricular reform has been considerably limited. Even today, the difference, when a graduate is hired on a particular employer, is not so obvious, who distinguishes quite hardly Bachelor and Master Degrees.

In order to increase the employability of graduates, the entrepreneurship education should be provided on a wide scale in all curriculum system along with the opportunity for every student to take a mobility for placement in an enterprise.

If we see the unemployment ratios (according to EuroStat figures¹ for the average unemployment ratio of persons aged 20-34 by educational attainment level for the period 2006-2010), we could appreciate that the higher education level of education it correspond a lower unemployment of young people.



On another hand, a study conducted among university graduates (Stoika, 2012) who have had a Erasmus² mobility shows that, the “Erasmus graduates” strongly agree (59% of subjects interviewed) that the period of mobility helped them in having a job sooner that theirs colleagues who haven’t conducted an Erasmus mobility.



Thus to the fact that now, in the context of world crises and the efforts to emerge to a more favourable situation, we consider that awarding special labels (ie. ECTS and DS Labels) in order to highlight the efforts made by a particular higher education institution to create a more flexible and integrated

¹ Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS)

² Erasmus Program, part of Lifelong Learning Program financed by European Commission.

curricula together with a more close cooperation with the actors in the labour market, is a stimulative European measure in order to achieve the strategic goals.

3. ECTS and DS LABEL

In 2008, the European Commission decided to launch the ECTS-DS Label¹ award after the consultation with the main stakeholders. The whole exercise of awarding labels have as target recognising excellence in the application of either system and promoting the overall objective of European Credit Transfer System and Diploma Supplement (making teaching and learning in higher education more transparent across Europe and facilitating the recognition of all studies. Secondly through these labels ensures the transfer of learning experiences between different institutes, greater student mobility and more flexible routes to gain degrees also aids curriculum design and quality assurance.

4. Conclusions

Introducing ECTS on a wide scale through higher education institutions across Europe have had as a result increasing transparency on every level. Also, as a Bologna Process tool, the Diploma supplement creates the base for a more standardised descriptors regarding the level, content and status of studies fulfilled by the diploma holder. Taking also in consideration the fact that until now at the European level, the number of ECTS Label holders (41 institutions) and DS Label holders (164 institutions) is still low, we consider that all the stakeholders should try to reinforce all measures to ensure more flexibility in curricula, full recognition and greater cooperation between the space of academic and economic area in order to achieve academic excellence and a better response to the needs of world in the future.

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