

EUROPEAN, NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LEVEL STRATEGIES FOR COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT – SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The Bologna process and its initiatives have put tertiary education at the centre of European Union (EU) policy with the goal to create a “Europe of knowledge” (Lisbon European Council, March 2000). The potential of higher education (HE) institutions to develop competencies which are relevant for the labour market and societal life is one of the most important issues of the topic. HE institutions should be clearly aware of which competencies are necessary for graduates to be better prepared for the world of work and active citizenship, and how HE institutions should develop these competencies.

In order to answer these questions, the Erasmus project “Higher Education as a Generator of Strategic Competencies” (HEGESCO) carries out research on three categories of stakeholders: graduates, employers and management staff of HE institutions. The consortium explores the validity of the graduates’ competencies acquired during studies in HE institutions, as well as competencies which have not been developed to a sufficient level during studies, but which are crucial for the implementation of the EU strategy. The results of the research will serve as a precondition for the improvement of curriculum organization. This paper is a first step in the research: the topic is analysed through the EU policy of education and employment for strategic competencies of a knowledge based economy and through the integration of relevant competencies into the curricula of tertiary education.

Every EU country has its own distinctive policy context features related to tertiary education. Besides these, the autonomy of universities provides the HE sector with a vast range of modes for curriculum organization. Identifying the diversity of the countries as well as HE institutions is essential for two reasons: 1) it validates research into graduates’ competencies, and 2) it assures that the needs of a diverse range of learners throughout Europe are met. Therefore, the aim of this report is to present the analysis of strategies of the European, national and (selected) tertiary education institutions for the organisation of curricula.

Apart from the introduction and conclusions, the report is organized in five chapters. The first chapter brings a short overview of EU policy fostering the modernization of HE curriculum and the development of the European higher education area. It is underlined that the European Commission calls Member States for a change in their approach to learning and teaching in HE. A more learner-centred approach, a stronger teacher-student relationship and flexible HE institutions should be developed. Employment guidelines, presented by the European Commission, provide the intention to adapt education and training systems in response to new competencies’ requirements in order to achieve the goal of full employment goal young people. According to the European Commission, “jobs are a key element in enabling young people to find their place in society, achieve economic independence and realise their individual aspirations” (European Commission, 2001, p. 37).

The agenda of the Bologna process for the modernization of HE for the better employability of graduates encompasses such issues as broadening access to tertiary education, diversifying study programmes, promoting mobility of students and internationalization of studies. Therefore Chapter Two provides a review of the national HE systems of HEGESCO countries and highlights national particularities moving towards a common European higher education area. The analysis shows that all HEGESCO countries follow the Bologna requirements. Nevertheless, the degree of standardization is not very high; countries

develop Bologna tasks according to their cultural, economic and political contexts. This issue is deeply influenced by the common feature of Hegesco countries, i.e. the former dependence to the Soviet block system. Turkey is the most different in this context.

Several distinctive Bologna elements are used for describing Hegesco countries' HE systems: 1) a binary structure of tertiary education with an emphasis on academic and vocational orientation is applied in all Hegesco countries. The countries differ in institutional organization of these two types of studies. The transition from one sector to another is not well developed in Hungary and Lithuania. 2) A three-cycle degree system has been developed in Hungary, Lithuania and Turkey, while in other Hegesco countries the process is still in its implementation phase. 3) ECTS has been developed as a credit accumulation and transfer system for Hegesco countries. The question whether Hegesco countries link credits with learning outcomes remains open. 4) The multiplication of tertiary education institutions was observed after the Soviet block had collapsed and the enrolments of students increased rapidly. In the last 10 years the number of students has doubled in Slovenia and Hungary, in Lithuania it quadrupled. The picture differs in Turkey, where education remains a privilege for some parts of society. 5) Financing the HE sector has been increasing in Hegesco countries in recent years; however, it did not correspond to the augmentation of student numbers. The proportion of GDP spent on HE is far behind the EU27 average, therefore an evident lack of resources for HE institutions in Hegesco countries is witnessed. 6) The number of private HE institutions is increasing. In Lithuania and Slovenia, most private HE institutions are concentrated in higher professional sectors; in Hungary there are church-owned academies and colleges as well as private colleges and universities. 7) A key condition for achieving the Bologna goals lies in the preservation of HE institutions' autonomy. According to the legal regulations of Hegesco countries, tertiary education institutions are accountable to their stakeholders. Accountability of HE institutions is treated as a tool for balancing state priorities, academic concerns and market forces.

The nature of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) with the respect to competency-based curriculum development is examined in Chapter Three of the report. The most important feature of the EQF is the links between educational structures and the labour market. Each level of the EQF is described in terms of typical learning outcomes that can be related to national qualification frameworks throughout Europe. National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) contain detailed information reflecting national priorities and cultures. The achievements of Hegesco countries in NQF development and its impact on the identification of relevant competencies for national HE curricula are also discussed. All Hegesco countries are on their way in developing NQF but at different stages. In Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia, NQF development brought a systemic change to curricula organization. Study programmes were re-designed on the basis of competencies and learning outcomes. In Turkey the process has just started and no major changes have appeared so far.

An analysis of the mission of tertiary education is important in order to make a valid judgement on those competencies that are to be developed during studies. For this reason, the fourth chapter discusses the mission of HE in light of modern society and the knowledge based economy. HE graduates have to be prepared to enter the labour market, caring for their education and professional development as well as being able to adapt to changing environments. Besides, tertiary education is required to generate democracy and the values of active citizenship.

HE studies are seen through the development of competencies, which are classified into general and subject-specific competencies. Tertiary education should balance between generic and subject-related competencies in order to equip graduates with relevant knowledge and skills through “a lifecycle perspective, stimulating the individual’s potential for creativity and autonomy, while avoiding mismatches with the labour market” (European Commission, 2007, p.3). Success in meeting these challenges depends on national and institutional strategies for curriculum modernization. Country and institution specific practices of competency-based curriculum implementation in the HE sector are provided in Chapter Five of the report. It mainly examines cooperation between HE institutions and stakeholders, professional development of academic staff and curriculum internationalization issues.

The “currency” for modernizing HE curriculum is learning outcomes, which are relevant to the competencies of the labour market. The success of curriculum modernization depends on human resource development strategies applied in particular HE institutions. The conceptual change requires academic staff to develop competencies in the fields of cooperation with various groups of stakeholders (employers, graduates, students, etc.), the implementation and permanent re-evaluation of learning outcomes, the development of critical alignments of study programmes and particular subjects, and the application of student-centred teaching/learning methods.

In Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia, competency-based curriculum development is under implementation. It is linked with other activities taking place to support the process, such as diploma supplements, NQF development, internal and external quality assurance procedures, etc. Most Turkish universities do not have any specific preference of education policies for competency-based curriculum. Implementation practices of inserting strategic competencies into the curricula of HEGESCO countries are differentiated according to the level of governance. In Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia, legal requirements determine that the competencies developed in a study programme are a subject of the opinion of professional bodies, employers and other stakeholders. Key learning outcomes linked with the NQF are based on professional standards or qualification inventories of a particular profession. Generic descriptors are under development for the first and second cycle programmes.

The validity and reliability of the identification of learning outcomes as well as their coherence to the competencies required by the labour market is fostered by the social-partnership principle. It is to be implemented in the activities of the bodies that (re-)design study programmes. In Lithuanian HE institutions’ social partnerships are developed through activities of study programme committees. Some activities of central educational committees are observed in certain Turkish universities, but they do not deal with the revision of learning outcomes. Stakeholders do not always take part in the process of identifying learning outcomes in Slovenian HE institutions, since the process is not sufficiently defined in legal regulations. In general, the cooperation between HE institutions and employers in the identification of strategic competencies is not sufficient enough. The most evident cooperation is observed in the organization of practical training activities, which is a mandatory component for the first cycle studies in Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia. A distinctive feature of Polish HE institutions when cooperating with employers is a well developed system of universities’ career services. In Slovenian, Lithuanian and in Hungarian HE institutions activities of career centres are not that sufficient in this field.

National quality assurance systems of Hegesco countries are composed of the two main components: 1) HE institutions, as providers that assure the quality of their performance as well as outputs, and 2) accreditation bodies that play their role in the context of accountability. Quality assurance is seen as a key tool applied in educational processes for ensuring the fulfilment of labour market demands and the needs of society. In Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia, students' involvement is a compulsory requirement of the internal (curriculum) quality assurance procedures. Surveys among other stakeholders, both graduates and employers, are performed occasionally in HE institutions of Hegesco countries. Mobility of staff and students is another tool for curriculum quality assurance since it helps to define learning outcomes in a qualitative way through international tendencies. HE institutions of Hegesco countries are active participants of the EU mobility programmes, hence the dissemination of best practices is assured.

There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with HE institutions. In order to cope with the task well, HE institutions should permanently explore the environment and improve the quality of curriculum on the basis of data. The research carried out by five educational and research institutions of Europe under the Hegesco project is one such attempt.