

Summary of Doctoral (PhD) Thesis

**THE BOLOGNA PROCESS IN HUNGARY
- HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM DEBATES
(1999-2009)**

Éva Szolár

Supervisor: Dr. Tamás Kozma



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School in the Humanities

Debrecen, 2012

1. The objective of the dissertation, determining the scope of the subject

The objective of our research is the study of the introduction of Bologna process and two-cycle degree system from a multiactor, multidimensional and multilevel (national, institutional and disciplinary) perspective through the whole policy cycle (from agenda setting and programming through decision-making to implementation and evaluation).

2. The applied methods

The subject of the research and the objectives defines the range of the eligible methodologies. The events of the policy process, the dynamics, narratives and discourses (reform debates) can be studied primarily with qualitative methods. This choice is influenced by the complexity of the theme, the iterative nature of policy-making and implementation, the lack of clear casual relations and dependent/independent variables, and the great variety of problem definitions, multilevel governance, and large number of actors. We are conceptualizing the study of the Bologna process in an open, flexible and iterative manner. Accordingly, we involved in the research the relevant actors and broadened the range of sources continuously. Likewise we adapted continuously to the special features of the policy process (continuous re-conceptualization).

The research was structured according to the different governance levels (national, institutional, disciplinary) along three dimensions and the stages of the policy process (agenda setting, programming, decision-making, implementation and evaluation). The research embraces a ten year period (1999-2009). However, the most part of sources primarily concerns the 2002-2009 period due to the emergence of the higher education reform. The document analysis and the interviews with key actors were the two main methods and sources. We were striving to include a large variety of actors and sources in the study of the higher education reforms.

3. The research results

1. What Bologna-interpretations exist in Hungary among the different policy actors?

In the last decade the Bologna process became the most important policy platform for the debates over the future of Hungarian higher education. In this interface the actors had the opportunity to discuss the most significant problems and remedies of higher education, the desirable structural arrangements and institutional configuration, and to reconsider the system governance and future role of the actors.

The Bologna process has several competing interpretations, which is based on different policy views (problems, casual theories, resolutions, tools, and implementation models), change perspectives, ideologies, beliefs and values. Two Bologna-interpretations stand out from these. The owner of these interpretations is the two main policy actor, who competes for the power and influence in higher education: the government (especially the educational governance and the initiators of the reforms) and the academic community (especially the professors). In the hand of these two policy actor the Bologna process became a platform on which different higher education visions can be written. No one of the higher education policy actors can be considered as a

homogeneous entity regarding the views, interests and value preferences. With regard to the change perspective, direction and content of the reform the main actors are fragmented, but two important and influential interpretations emerges. The 2002-2009 period was marked by the showdowns and monopolistic ambitions of these two Bologna- and higher education reform interpretations.

The educational governance is the main force of the change. This actor envisions a comprehensive, radical reform of the higher education, which is based in one hand on the previously canceled and interrupted change ambitions (e.g. governance reforms), and in other hand on the new higher education policy challenges (e.g. integration to the European Union, joining the European Higher Education Area). The comprehensive reform is a one large step answer to these challenges. The initiators exhausted the wide social and political support of the Bologna-goals in order to implement national reform priorities. In fact, the reformers envisioned the change of institutional frameworks and structural arrangements of the higher education system under the Bologna-umbrella. The reform program entitled “Joining the European Higher Education Area” embodies the change perspectives of the educational governance, which envisaged restructuring in four domains: system governance and funding, institutional management, and academic reform (the first three are continuously on reform agenda from the 80s, whilst the latter one is drawn from Bologna engagements). This means the re-conceptualization of (1) the state’s role in governance and funding, (2) the power-distribution between the policy actors, (3) the institutional configuration and structuring principles, (4) the curricular philosophy. The change of traditional university model and the academic community are the most important goals of these reforms. Whilst the market governance the central idea. This reform interpretation – taken as a whole – beyond the formal, structural changes would mean the transformation of the higher education culture (norms, attitudes and values).

The academic community is the main social and political force of stability. Their Bologna-image is in agreement with the original goals of Bologna Declaration. In the interpretation of the academic community the Bologna process represents the introduction of the two cycle degree system. The traditionalist part of the academic community supports only the formal implementation of the degree system, but with the preservation of the existing arrangements and higher education culture. The more modernist part of the academic community recognizes that opportunity to resolve structural problems based on the large legitimation of the Bologna process. Thus they consider acceptable the transcending of the narrow interpretation and the implementation of moderate structural-curricular innovations.

Behind the two Bologna-interpretations hides two competing change perspectives. One is envisioning a radical change, which is represented by the educational governance and their allies. This change perspective is future-oriented, utopian, which think about a deep, fundamental transformation, with one large step shift from the *status quo*. The policy argumentation is marked by a negative social critic and view on higher education, is unilateral and conflictual policy-making, which is closed, exclusive, expert-based and apolitical. The speed of the claimed changes are fast, rapid (“there is no time”, “we are late”, it is necessary to catch up in time etc.) and is based on radical problem images. The reform policy is planning the redistribution of resources (power, influence) between the higher education policy actors.

The other change perspective is incremental, which is represented especially by the academic community. This change perspective rejects the radical transformation and they prefer the small shift from the *status quo* (the “small steps”-reform policy). The academic community conceptualizes the higher education policy-making as an open, deliberative, consensus-seeking, cooperative and compromise-oriented process, since they have the opportunity of legitimating their selves as a negotiator only in this manner. This perspective is characterized by the rejection and skeptical view of top-down generated changes. In policy-making this perspective is realist, iterative and anti-utopian, and is marked by a positive view of society. In addition, accepts the role of politics in higher education policy-making in the original sense of struggle of different ideas, values and interests. This approach rejects the redistribution of resources or accepts only in that way if this redistribution will benefit them (e.g. the elite study roots, resource concentration to the research universities).

2. How has evolved the higher education reforms in the policy process?

The differences in change perspectives can be traced back to the diversity of actor roles, interests and values. The educational governance is in the policy-maker position and has the authority to form the basis of the future arrangements of higher education (at least at the level of policy visions). The academic community appears in the role of implementator, and naturally shows interest to influence the reform vision before implementation. The academic community strives to actively intervene and frame the content of higher education policies, and they do not accept the passive executive role. The showdowns of the particular policy stages take place with different actors and in different arenas.

The main actor of the agenda setting and programming period is the educational governance and the allied experts, whilst the central arena the negotiations behind closed doors at the political-administrative level. In this period the higher education policy appears as a professional-technical issue. The actors have full control over the policy process and content, since the participation is closed to politically and ideologically committed members. There is consensus in agenda setting and programming. The agenda setting (putting an issue or problem on the agenda) is influenced by international and European higher education policy issues (Bologna process, Lisbon process), ideological factors and social-economical challenges. In fact, the Hungarian higher education policy simultaneously responds to the international trends (higher education policy convergence) and to the internal, national demands. The actors apply the classic European model of the agenda setting, which is a mix of the mobilisation and the inner initiation model: the decision-maker takes the initiative (the Minister of Education), but the groups (experts) with special access to the decision-maker provide content and form to the higher education policy. Characteristically to this model, this group avoids the publicity (preference for anonymity) and they view the social debate with hostility.

The reform concept is presented to the professional and wider social public (social debate, negotiations between ministries, media debates), and in this process the actors turn the higher education reform issue into a political concern. The concept lacks any political and social support. In one hand, it is surrounded by a wide rejection and massive critic from the side of central administration and other actors from the political-

administrative level (affected ministries and the government). The corporations, however, are arguing against the reform in a moderate level. In other hand, the reform has not received support also from the social partners (higher educational institutions), indeed, it is surrounded by resistance, protest and rejection. The debaters are disappointed: in spite of the many debates undertaken with the initiators the negotiation is considered fruitless, since they cannot influence or only slightly the content of the reform program.

Still the content is under full control of the educational governance, which is ready to undertake conflicts for it, and for a long time makes gesture level withdrawals. The actors contest the concept's every single element: from the change perspective, ideological backgrounds, casual theories and problem images to resolutions, tools and implementation models. The opponents would like to provoke a conceptual debate all the while, and on the end of one they would welcome a consensual content. The opponents employ non-institutionalized types of interest articulation since they are permanently unsuccessful regarding the reform content, cannot get into a formal negotiator position, and their views are not acknowledged by the educational governance. This type of interest articulation is the organization of civil movements, mobilisation, protests, lobbying, mobilisation of professional and political networks, writing critical articles, thematization of the media, making alliances, elements of direct democracy, support for support, inner division of the government.

The higher education reform concept hardly changed yet to the period of decision-making. To this period the reform records the form of a higher education law and the arena of showdowns has changed: the Parliament and the Constitutional Court becomes the center. The constitutional debates become stronger and they open the door for influencing the reform legally. The opponents successfully turn the political debates into legal-professional disputes, since in this way they get power to control the reform content. One of the outstanding results of the opponent's success is the failing of the promulgation of higher education law and the withdrawal of the educational governance from behind the most debated institutional governance reform. But the educational governance has also successes: there were several attempts to hinder the micro-implementation of the Bologna-goals, but these were successfully prevented and the content does not change considerably.

To the period of implementation from the universal reform plans remains only one considerable reform area, which maintains also its coherency: the original Bologna-goals (so called "academic reform"). This is in fact the structural and curricular reforms related to the Bologna process. The main actors of the period are the members of the academic community; they become the most important guiding forces of the reform process. The educational governance loses the most part of their influence over the process (implementation); only slightly and formally can control the implementation. The implementators actively form the Bologna process according to their interests and value preferences.

3. What higher education policy themes emerge under the Bologna-umbrella?

In higher education reform debates and argumentations some recurrent central themes can be recognized. The themes are structured by the different interests, value preferences and ideological perspectives of the actors. Below we will make an attempt to

systematize these themes along empirical-cognitive and moral-normative dimensions. It is important to emphasize that the fundamental questions of the Hungarian higher education lay behind the higher education policy themes, where the higher education reform offers an opportunity for answer. The essence of the fundamental questions is what future of Hungarian higher education the actors would like to see? What is higher education? What role has the state in higher education? What is the university? Who can enter, who can be a member? Who's the higher education? Who's the university? These subjects appear in two main topic of higher education debates: (1) institutional governance, (2) higher education restructuring.

The central topic of the institutional governance and funding reform is the preferred university-model: entrepreneurial (American) versus humboldtian (German). Behind this we can found the different interpretations of institutional autonomy and power arrangements in institutions. According to the argumentation of the educational governance the planned degree reform only in that case can count with success, if the whole system will be reconsidered. The realization of the universal higher education reform requires professional management, thus the rearrangement of the power structures and decision-making competences can be legitimized. The opponents know well that the operation of the system and their roles sets on the reconsideration of the rules of the game, thus they are opposing powerfully the initiative.

The new university-vision is associated with different ideological and value preferences, power arrangements, autonomy model and state/higher education relationship. Behind the initiative lie such problem definitions which refer to the lack of efficiency and effectiveness in institutional operation. According to the argumentation the strengthening of the top governance in institutions (the rector), the performance-based funding, the establishment of professional management, the elimination of monopolies in and the stronger representation of stakeholders in decision-making will relieve the operational problems of institutions. At the same time, the strengthening of financial autonomy makes possible the business-like, entrepreneurial running of institutions and the long-term, strategic planning. As from the debates became visible, the planned steps has little or no social-political support.

The opponents of the reform defend the *status quo*. The political and ideological opposition (the refusal of privatization and market-orientation) are wrapped in debates over autonomy and self-governance. The opponents prefer the existing relationship and power distribution between the state and higher education (if possible with the additional strengthening of the academic control and cutback of central bureaucratic ruling). They are viewing the influence of the academic community and the collegial control as the most important guarantee for the internal democracy of institutions and the maintenance of democratic relation with the state (society). They reject the rearrangement of the power relations, the emergence of new actors in institutional decision-making and sharing of the power with these actors, since it is considered as a diminishment of the institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The other central topic of the higher education reform debates are the structural problems of the system. The Bologna process is a great opportunity to expose these problems. The system's main challenge is the mass higher education and the gradually developing general higher education. The Bologna process is considered by the actors as a platform for the resolution of those conflicts which emerges from these challenges.

Behind the debates lie the next questions: What institutional configuration is preferred for the future operation of the higher education? What should be the structuring force? What kind of functions should have the different institutional and program types? How should be governed the entrance to higher education? How should realized the vertical and horizontal differentiation of the institutions? What kind of functions should have the different program cycles?

The reformers are seen in the Bologna process the opportunity of the construction of a new higher education structure. The initiators envisaged an open, flexible and permeable higher education, which promotes the mobility and supports the emergence of shorter study programs. The preferred institutional configuration is the unified and stratified system. In this arrangement the mobility within institutions and different institutional types is unhindered, there exists various and many entry and exit points, and the previous studies and the competences gained at work are easily acknowledged. In this perspective, the education of the mass is concentrated to the lower program levels and non-university institutions, while the elite functions are fulfilled at top of the institutional and program hierarchies, and with diversified study paths. These planned changes presuppose curricular reforms: there is a shift of accent from the deep, specialist to the generalist content, from the academic, discipline-based knowledge to competences, from theory to practice, and from the extensive to intensive curricula.

We outline the point of view of the opponents under the reflections regarding the implementation of the structural-curricular reforms.

4. What are the outcomes of the implementation?

The evaluation of the outcomes of structural-curricular reforms has a high policy importance. The so called “academic reform” is the only reform area, which was able to reach the stage of implementation in a coherent manner. The rest of reform plans becomes diluted or disappears from the agenda. The cause of the success of narrowly interpreted Bologna-reforms is in its higher political-social support and legitimation. The assessments are mixed and they change significantly in time. The top-downer evaluations are marked by pessimism and negative critic: between the original goals and the outcomes is a gap. For the implementation deficit the academic community (the faculty, primarily the professors) is responsible. From the bottom-up perspective all of this shows differently. The assessments are moderately optimistic: the actors actively form the implementation, based on autonomous interpretations and local, disciplinary and program requirements. If the implementation failures arise, then in that the central government’s legalistic, prescriptive and ideological view can be made responsible.

The adequate assessment of a new structure and arrangement is possible only in long-term, since there is time for experiencing, correction and for the discovery of the concept. The time gives an opportunity for the remedies of children’s disease. The evaluation of the results (after four-five year) it is very early, but for the illumination of the initial problems there is a possibility.

The structural reforms formally were realized, but at curricular level the old programs prevail. The binary structure was preserved through the institutional hierarchies and program types (this is represented by the idea to create academic and professional Bachelor and Master). The study period were shortened, but the deep, specialist, extensive

curricular philosophy prevail, which overcrowded the programs. In addition, the further study ambitions (at Master level) grow steadily, which in turn makes longer the time spent in higher education. This shows the prevailing reliance on the long study programs. The horizontal and vertical differentiation – according to the expectations – has not been realized (the universities and colleges continuously focuses on most functions, tries to be present in most program levels and types, and aspire to maintain or increase their size). Instead of flexibility the structure becomes (in the first years) more rigid, the Bachelor level get a “school”-character, is increasingly regulated, stuffing with obligatory subjects and low credit points, which hinders the mobility. The content of the Master-Bachelor and their relation was poorly conceptualized, but with the running up of higher program levels in this regard there will be an improvement. Finally, there is a large uncertainty and pessimism regarding the labor market value of new degrees, primarily with regard to the academic three year Bachelor degree (even if from the empirical data outline a more optimistic picture).

The implementation deficits have not only operative, technical and management-administrative explanations, but most of them are sourced in public policy. The explanations of reform failures according to our conceptual-theoretical perspective unambiguously can be identified in: (1) the comprehensive reform ambitions, which aspires to change the whole system and mean a considerable shift from the status quo; (2) the plan to re-distribute the resources, roles and playground between actors; (3) the lack of political and social support; (4) heterogeneous interests and value preferences; (5) competing higher education policy visions, casual theories, and problem definitions; (6) instead of clear, technically well defined objectives ambiguous, general and symbolic goals; (7) non-engaged implementators toward the central reform ambitions, which have considerable scope for action; (8) too many slightly controllable actor; (9) the lack of political engagement to support the costs of the reform.

4. The author's publications in the subject of the dissertation

Volumes:

1. Kozma, T., Óhidy, A., Rébay, M. and Szolár, É. (eds., 2012): *The Bologna Process in East-Central Europe*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden. (forthcoming, 212 page)

Articles:

1. A Bologna-folyamat kritikai fogadtatása a felsőoktatás-kutatás irodalmában. *Magyar Pedagógia*, 2009/2, 147-167.
2. Az európai felsőoktatás átalakulása és a Bologna-folyamat céljai. *Iskolakultúra*, 2009/9, 95-119.
3. New Opportunities, Old Challenges: The Romanian Denominational Higher Education in the Bologna Process. *Christian Higher Education*, 2010/2, 124-150.
4. The Bologna Process: the Reform of the European Higher Education Systems. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 2011/1, 81-99.
5. A felsőoktatás reformja és a Bologna-folyamat Magyarországon. *Magyar Pedagógia*, 2010/3, 239-263.
6. The Implementation of Two-Cycle Degree Structure in Hungary. *New Education Review*, 2010/3-4, 93-100.

Book chapters:

1. A „bolognai folyamat” Romániában. In Kozma, T. - Rébay, M. (2008, szerk.): *The Bologna Process in Central Europe*. Budapest: Új Mandátum. 145-165.
2. A romániai felsőoktatás átalakulása 1989/90 után. Bajusz, B. et al. (2009, szerk.): *Professori Salutem*. Debrecen: CHERD. 327-333.
3. Mi a Bologna-folyamat? In Kozma, T. – Pataki, Gy. (2010, szerk.): *Kisebbségi felsőoktatás és a Bologna-folyamat*. Debrecen: CHERD. 11-44.
4. The Bologna Process in Romania. In Kozma, T., Óhidy, A., Rébay, M. and Szolár, É. (eds., 2012): *The Bologna Process in East-Central Europe*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden. (forthcoming, 21 page)
5. The Bologna-inspired Higher Education Reforms and Debates in Hungary. Pusztai, G., Hatos, A. and Ceglédi, T. (eds., 2012): *Third Mission of Higher Education in a Cross-Border Region. Educational Research in Central and Eastern Europe I* CHERD-Hungary. Régió és Oktatás sorozat IX. (forthcoming, 10 page)