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The Understanding of the Bologna Process in Lithuanian Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to outline the practices and challenges of Lithuanian higher education institutions in relation to the Bologna process. We answer the question how Bologna process has been translated in the Lithuania's higher education institutions and how they have been acted upon? One of the findings from five case studies in 2008 suggests that there are different interpretations of Bologna related reforms at the institutional level. While interviewed institutional managers are aware of the Bologna process, half of the interviewed academic staff (computer science and humanities) is largely unaware about it. This raises implementation related questions.

Presentation

1. Introduction

Higher education systems in Europe have experienced increasing calls for harmonization and benchmarking in the face of the increasingly global competition in higher education. One of such manifestations is the Bologna Process, which started in 1999 when 19 European Ministers of Education signed the Bologna Declaration, the purpose of which was to introduce the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the year 2010. The aim of the EHEA is to increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education in relation to the rest of the world. The Bologna Declaration (1999) has six goals:

1. Adoption of a system of easily comparable degrees;
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate;
3. Establishment of a system of credits, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS);
4. Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement;
5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies;
6. Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regard to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes, and integrated programmes of study, training, and research.

The Bologna Process has been highlighted by increasing membership beyond the European Union countries, and institutionalized via a series of ministerial meetings which expanded the

goals of the initial Bologna Declaration. The consecutive ministerial meetings, among other goals, have called for promotion of compatibility and comparability of the higher education systems. They have emphasized life-long learning, increasing the attractiveness of European higher education, creation of the institutional and national systems of quality assurance, introduction of the three-cycle structures, adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance, the establishment of national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes and workload, and promotion of the Diploma Supplement and ECTS to increase transparency and recognition.

The Bologna Process spurred higher education reforms in various European countries. These countries tend to use the Bologna Process as a legitimization of their own national reforms (Huisman & Wende, 2004). Some countries adopt certain recommendations of Bologna within their own higher education systems in regard to structural matters. However, at the same time, they try to avoid drastic changes in educational content. Thus, European countries follow the Bologna Process selectively, leaving certain areas of higher education systems untouched (Witte, 2006). The latter approach is especially visible in Central and Eastern European countries that intended to become European Union (EU) members and used the Bologna Process in part as legitimization for accession to the EU (Leisyte, 2008).

Several studies (Hoffman, Välimaa & Huusko, 2008; Neave & Amaral, 2008; Palomba 2008, Veiga & Amaral, 2009) have, however, pointed out that while the Bologna Process may have progressed well at the system level, it has not done so at the institutional and basic unit levels. Neave and Amaral (2008) argue that the basic strategy behind the Bologna Process needs to be reconsidered with more focus on the extent to which the different systems of higher education engaged in the Bologna Process are able to absorb this new commitment.

There is little evidence about progress at the institutional level. The problem with the studies of implementation is that Bologna can be seen as a moving target both when it comes to the policies themselves as well as their implementation. As Guy Neave has eloquently put it:

In truth, the Bologna Process is the Artillery man's nightmare. For effectively, the grasp we might have of its dynamic depends intimately on which level of analysis one focuses upon. There is a 'high speed track', represented by the statements of intent and the continuous adding of new items by each succeeding Ministerial Conference. There is a less accommodating vision to progress registered when attention turns to the question of implementation. And whilst implementation itself remains a moving target in the sense Wittrock and de Leon (1985) first laid upon it, it moves at a very different pace, as most of the Trend Reports grudgingly admit (Neave, 2006, p. 3).

In his view, the gap between the policies and implementation of Bologna is not closing, but widening.

The Lithuanian higher education system offers an interesting example of a country where Bologna was implemented to a certain extent at the structural level before accession to the EU

and was used as legitimation for incrementalism in its higher education system. After accession to the EU, however, the Bologna objectives went into the background. Besides the Bologna Process progress reports and the EU Commission's stocktaking exercises, there is little evidence to what extent the Bologna related reforms have permeated the Lithuanian higher education system at the institutional level and how is it perceived by the academics themselves.

This paper aims to share the insights gained from eight case studies of academic departments in five Lithuanian higher education institutions about their understanding of the Bologna Process and the perceptions of its implementation. The major focus of the studies examined how the Bologna Process is understood and interpreted at the institutional level given the backdrop of Lithuanian higher education reform. In particular, we were interested in exploring how much the key dimensions of the structural and substantial Bologna goals have been implemented in the academic departments of Lithuanian higher education institutions with regard to quality assurance, mobility and ECTS, three-cycle degree structures, employability, and life-long learning.

We conducted interviews at eight departments in five Lithuanian higher education institutions: two universities (A and B) and three colleges (C, D, and E). We chose a cross section of individuals in the institutions: central and middle management, heads of departments, and academics. As academic rank is influential, we interviewed both junior and senior academics (Neumann & Terosky, 2007). In the Lithuanian higher education system, deans and heads of departments are elected, while the Rector/Director is, as of May 2009, appointed by the University Board. The selection of the institutions was purposeful to represent the binary divide in the system and the variety of higher education institutions, such as public and private, comprehensive and specialized.

Given the complexity of higher education institutions as loosely coupled organizations (Weick 1978), and the importance of disciplinary communities (Becher and Trowler 2001), the focus of the study needed to be multi-level, exploring the views of university management as well as the academic staff in different disciplinary communities. The departments in each institution were chosen in two disciplines: humanities (foreign languages) and computer science. The selection of disciplines was based on the soft and hard sciences (Biglan 1973) rationale. In this way, four departments of computer science and four departments of humanities were visited in November-December 2008. In total, 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out. The data was transcribed verbatim and coded according to the themes emerging from the corpus as well as according to the questions covered in the interview schedules. Data analysis was based on the interviews, documents, and secondary literature; thus, data triangulation was employed (Yin, 2000).

This paper, firstly, introduces the Lithuanian higher education system in terms of its

institutional body as well as regulations. Further, we present the case studies of eight departments in five higher education institutions. In the main body of the paper, we present and analyze how academics and academic administrators in Lithuanian higher education institutions perceive and understand the Bologna Process. Further, we aim to understand how much change the higher education institutions have experienced in terms of the key dimensions of the structural and substantial Bologna goals. The major findings are discussed in the last section of the paper.

2. Lithuanian higher education context

Higher education institutional fabric consists of the policy making bodies, such as the Cabinet and the Ministry of Education and Science, national policy advisory bodies, such as Lithuanian Science Council, the Academy of Science, and the intermediary The Centre for Quality Evaluation in Higher Education (CQAHE), and the representative bodies, such as the Rectors' conference or Directors' conference. The higher education institutions are public and private, university-type and non-university-type. The university-type institutions are doctorate awarding institutions, both comprehensive and specialized. The non-university institutions, the colleges, are undergraduate degree granting institutions where academics carry out applied research.

In 2008, the Lithuanian higher education sector comprised 31 public higher education institutions (15 public universities and 16 public colleges) and 19 private higher education institutions (7 private universities and 12 private colleges). The Lithuanian system of higher education has seen a rapid expansion in terms of the number of higher education institutions as well as student numbers since regaining its independence in 1990.

The higher education policy framework, until May 2009, was based on the 2000 Law on Higher Education which defined the three-cycle study structure with 3-4 years to attain a Bachelor's degree, 1.5-2 years for a Master's degree, and 3 years for a PhD degree. Bologna has not been mentioned in the 2000 Law or in the by-laws. The 2000 Law on Higher Education did not define quality assurance procedures in any way. Under the initiative of the CQAHE, the Rules of Assessment for higher education and research institutions were approved by the Minister in 2000 (Mockiene 2004). The Ministerial decree of March 18, 2002, on the decision regarding evaluated programmes provided the legal grounds of accreditation. The availability of the EU structural funds has spurred debates on higher education reform which started with the Higher Education Development Plan (2006-2010) and the newly drafted Higher Education Law that has been debated in 2007-2009. The debates and amendments of the 2000 Law brought the new Higher Education Law of 2009. This Law prescribes programme evaluation and accreditation, as well as institutional evaluation and accreditation. It also requires a regular external evaluation of the CQAHE, introduces ECTS as a compulsory credit

accumulation and transfer system (up to 2009 local credits were transferred into ECTS only upon request of a student), and made dual degrees possible.

The recent initiatives toward higher education reform in 2009 take a more liberal approach to market driven mechanisms in the higher education sector. Bologna agenda is mentioned in the policy rhetoric (Ministry Presentation of the Draft Law to the Parliament) in terms of redefining the roles of the Centre for Quality Evaluation in Higher Education. This centre was established already in 1995 with the aim to implement schemes of accreditation, evaluation, and approval of new programmes in higher education institutions. Although the centre operates as an independent institution, its activities are heavily regulated by the government. CQAHE is a member of the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA). Currently the centre performs institutional evaluation, as well as quality assessment of study programmes, research, and performing and visual arts activities. In the quality assurance of higher education this means a more dispersed authority of the evaluation bodies. In the proposed law, the quality assurance procedures extend to the evaluation of research which is proposed to be carried out by the Lithuanian Science Council separately from the quality assurance procedures of the CQAHE. Moreover, it proposes a periodic evaluation of the work of the CQAHE, which is a new phenomenon. A special Bologna follow-up group has been established at the Ministry to provide a formal basis of the adherence to the Bologna Process in Lithuania

3. Lithuanian higher education institutions in focus

The case studies include four departments of foreign languages and four departments of computer sciences in a variety of higher education institutions in Lithuania. The history of departments varies per institution and across institutions. Some departments have existed for many years while others are barely ten years old (see Table 1). This is partly because colleges were established later than universities, and also because of the difference between the ‘old’ discipline of humanities and the ‘new’ discipline of computer science. As seen in the table, the departments range in size and institutional setting. In the universities, both departments cater not only to their own full-time students, but are also educating students from other majors from across the university who need foreign language and computer literacy. This is less true of the college departments, as they are more specialized (such as cases C and D) and cater to much smaller student numbers.

The selection of the institutions was purposeful to represent the binary divide in the system and the variety of higher education institutions (HEIs), such as public and private, comprehensive and specialized.

Table 1. Major characteristics of the case studies

	A	B	C	D	E
HEI Type	Public Comprehensive University	Public Specialized University	Public Specialized College	Private College	Public Specialized College
HEI size (No. of Students in 2008)	9000	12 000	8000	5000	2000
Department of computer science visited, size (No. of students)	B1 yes (300)	A 1 yes (100)	C1 yes (235)	E1 yes (50)	no
Department of foreign languages visited, size (No. of students)	B2 yes (300)	A 2 yes (100)	no	E2 yes (30)	D2 yes (60)
Age of foreign language and computer science departments and their study programmes	Computer science (20 years) Foreign languages (10 years) Incremental change	Computer science (20 years) Foreign languages (50 years) Incremental change	Computer science (5 years)	Computer science (7 years) Foreign languages (7 years).	Foreign languages (5 years)

Explanation: 1 = computer science, 2 = foreign languages, e.g., A1 = the computer science department of University A. Source: Universities' documents and web-sites.

4. Perceptions from Five Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions

We identified the following themes from our interviews with academics and academic administrators, which focus on key aspects of the Bologna Process: quality assurance, the three-cycle degree structure, international mobility and employability. In the following section, we present the views of the academics and academic administrators from our case studies. We begin with our respondents' views of the Bologna Process, followed by a presentation of the major aspects of this process in the Lithuanian context.

4.1 How Lithuanian Academics and Administrators perceive the Bologna Process

Our results show differences in views between university and college academics and administrators, and between academics of sciences and humanities departments in understanding and interpreting the Bologna Process. In particular, our findings show that academics and administrators have a different understanding of Bologna Process.

Lecturers and heads of departments demonstrate a rather narrow understanding of the process. They usually focus on one aspect of the process; most often it is in a common European higher education area, or the two-cycle structure, e.g., the "Bologna Process is a Bachelor's and

Master's degree," or its goal is the mobility of students and academic staff. Some respondents said that they heard about the Bologna Process but really did not know what it was. One of the typical examples of such a view was noted by one academic: "It is something that I heard about, but what is really going on is not very clear to me". This study reveals that half of the academics interviewed either do not know what the Bologna Process is, or they see it as rhetoric, something they have heard about in the media, but have little or no understanding of. This was especially true for the junior academics who are post-docs or assistant professors. Their senior colleagues – associate and full professors with at least 10 years of experience - have seen a shift from the one-cycle to the two-cycle system of degree programmes and the establishment of quality assurance procedures.

The Deans and Vice-Rectors have a better understanding. They see it as an important process related to the creation of the European Higher Education Area and the facilitation of quality assurance and improved education. In their view as administrators of higher education institutions, many structural changes have taken place under the Bologna Process, such as the establishment of quality assurance and accreditation procedures, and the establishment of offices that are responsible for the internationalization of education. When listing the areas where most changes have occurred, administrators emphasized quality assurance structures and procedures. They said that the Bologna Process was a driving force in their efforts to review and modernize study programmes as well as review the whole higher education system.

The academic administrators were able to more thoroughly explain the credit transfer system, learning-outcomes oriented study programmes, and the mechanisms of quality assurance than the academics. The likely reason for this is that top and middle administrators in higher education institutions (HEIs) have to oversee the overall implementation related to various goals of the Bologna process within their institution, while lecturers and department heads usually participate in separate initiatives related to the Bologna Process.

Slight differences in the perception of the Bologna Process were found between universities and colleges. College academics positively evaluate the possible shortening of the study period, especially in the first level. The view of one college lecturer reflects this standpoint: "I think that three years is rather optimal, and four years perhaps is too lengthy; you have to earn more credits and study more subjects; some of programmes may be excessive". In contrast, university academics are more critical of the shortening of the undergraduate programmes and tend to link the potential shortening of the programmes with decreased quality of education.

Some disparities in perceptions of the Bologna Process between computer science and foreign languages professors were observed, especially when in terms of student and staff international mobility. Humanities professors foresee increasing possibilities of academic mobility under the Bologna Process, while computer scientists are more reserved in this respect.

They worry about the compatibility of studies in Lithuania and other European countries, and indicated that most of their students would likely be unwilling to leave the country as they have jobs that they need to keep.

4.2 Perceptions and practices of quality assurance

Quality assurance at the institutional level is the responsibility of institutional administrators, which most often have centralized quality enhancement and assurance units to carry out this role. The distinctions in the area of quality assurance are more noticeable between colleges and universities than between various academic departments. Our study shows that internal quality assurance structures and systems were more pronounced in the colleges than in the universities (see Table 2). One possible reason for this is the fact that restructured non-university higher education institutions and newly established colleges are subject to accreditation and compulsory external institutional evaluation, thus most have been ‘encouraged’ to establish internal quality monitoring procedures according to the CQAHE. This is not the case with universities. University staff (both administrators and academics) reported that they do not need to undertake external institutional evaluation by Law, but that some voluntarily do so. Currently, institutional evaluation methodology has been developed and approved by the CQAHE for the university sector and it remains a voluntary procedure. Evaluation of study programmes is compulsory for all higher education institutions whereby national expert teams evaluate new study programmes and international expert teams evaluate existing study programmes for accreditation.

Table 2. Internal quality assurance mechanisms implemented in the five higher education institutions

	A	B	C	D	E
Quality assurance unit	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Internal quality system	no	no	yes (<i>TQM principles and ISO standards for administration processes</i>)	yes (<i>ISO 9001:2000 standards for administration processes and study programmes</i>)	yes (<i>"Quality Guide" outlines responsibilities and functions matrix of each division</i>)
Institutional self-assessment	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Reviewing study programmes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Market/ Employer survey/interviews	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Assessment of academic staff professional qualifications	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
Student survey	yes (<i>teaching quality, organization of studies quality</i>).	yes (<i>teaching quality</i>)	yes (<i>academic staff, department, faculty, institutional performance</i>)	yes (<i>teaching quality, academics can be fired</i>)	yes (<i>teaching and overall study program quality, needs assessment</i>)
Alumni survey/interviews/meetings/destination monitoring	yes	yes	yes	yes (<i>recently started</i>)	yes
Faculty survey	yes (<i>teaching quality</i>)	yes (<i>teaching quality</i>)	no	yes (<i>administration quality</i>)	no

Source: Interviews and institutional documents.

Table 2 illustrates internal quality assurance mechanisms implemented [in institutions of] our case studies. All colleges reported that they have internal quality-assurance systems in place, whereas both universities in our study reported having various quality-assurance tools, but seem to have a fragmented approach to quality matters. In all of our case studies, quality initiatives are most pronounced in teaching and learning. Only one institution reported the need to develop a quality educational culture.

In our case studies only one-third of the academics interviewed in computer science and foreign languages departments link quality assurance procedures with the Bologna Process. Those who link the two see both internal and external quality-assurance procedures as part of the Bologna reforms that actually help them monitor and enhance education quality. As noted by a senior computer science academic, EU higher education policies, including the Bologna process, “brought a qualitative leap” to their institution. The academic staff and administrators agreed on the reasons for enhancing the quality of higher education. They cited the difference between external and internal factors. In their view, market, internationalization and student competence at the entry level are external factors that substantially influence the quality of higher education. Computer science department staff, however, were much more sensitive to labour market needs and had worked hard to develop closer relations with industry than did the foreign language departments. The computer scientists were able to achieve this partly through open communication with employers and their feedback on their study programmes and partly through student interns’ observations. One computer science professor stated:

...a lot of students are working [while they attend school]. They know what is needed, what is new in the field. Once we heard from enterprises: ‘Your students lack knowledge about this system’, so we incorporated it into our curriculum and now we even have a separate module on that.

Sufficient resources, technology and access to information were identified by computer science and humanities departments as very important factors that enhance the quality of studies. Updated information technologies were key to curricula enhancement across computer science departments, whereas access to literature, technologies, resources and finances were cited as most important by foreign languages academics.

Academics noted, however, that “external mechanisms are not sufficient to assure quality”. In their responses to the question: What main factors influence the quality of studies?, academics were very focused on their job of teaching. Two-thirds of academics stated that their competence as teachers, attitude about teaching and the curriculum are the determiners of the educational

quality. Academics also noted that the existing internal quality structures, mechanisms and management engagement play important roles in enhancing quality. In this regard, the end-of-semester evaluations were identified as one of the most useful instruments in improving the quality of their work.

Finally, internal factors, such as students' cognitive skills were mentioned as important determinants of the quality of education. For example, humanities academics linked their students' cognitive skills, (e.g., linguistic abilities at the entry level) and their study attitude (e.g., their willingness to work hard) with learning outcomes and, thus quality of studies.

Academic administrators and academics in both disciplines (humanities and computer science) at the universities and colleges alike cited programme accreditation as a major tool for providing quality assurance. Nearly one-third of the administrators view accreditation as a positive quality assurance mechanism that helps to identify areas that need improvement. Academic administrators believe that programme accreditation brings transparency, prestige, and opportunities for benchmarking academic activities. They also noted positive outcomes of the updated accreditation process: accreditation experts are better prepared to perform their evaluation tasks, interviews are conducted in a friendlier manner, and more parameters are evaluated than in the past. The latter, of course, might mean more work for academics and so this might be interpreted both as a positive and negative development. In our interviews, some administrators stated that they believe accreditation is a subjective process because they are evaluated by international experts who often lack contextual information. As one respondent said:

Experts do not always have a thorough understanding of Lithuanian higher education, its most pressing issues, legal requirements and the [individual academic] programme itself. Oftentimes evaluation is too shallow.

Moreover, administrators stated that they believe accreditation has an underlying auditing role and simply checks the programmes' alignment with external regulations. In their view, more attention needs to be paid to "the development of student competences". One Vice Rector observed that accreditation should not be a political decision. In his view, the evaluative nature of the assessment should replace the current "punitive" nature of the process. An open peer dialog would perhaps add more value to the process. A further challenge is seen from the academic administrators' point of view. They see accreditation as a lengthy process that results in a time lag. As one department chair noted: "While you develop the programme, have it externally validated and registered, the market demand shifts".

The level of academic staff engagement in the accreditation process varies. Some academics play a more active role, whereas others do not participate at all or just engage in course analyses and updates. Over half of the academic respondents agreed with management's view that

accreditation is a positive and necessary practice to enhance the quality of education. The other half sees the accreditation process as too formal and bureaucratic. They are concerned that some programmes might not be accredited if they do not meet the experts' subjective experiences and that it would be much more efficient to assess learning outcomes. One professor noted that if an internal quality system was viable, there wouldn't be the need to have an external programme evaluation. In other words, an internal quality assurance system would inform the external evaluators.

The criticism of the processes of programme accreditation in both academic disciplines interviewed focuses on issues of comparison between programmes vs. evaluation, strict regulation vs. flexibility, subjectivity vs. clear criteria. In general, computer science departments had a more positive experience with accreditation processes than foreign languages departments. The majority of foreign language academics and only a quarter of computer science academics said that their programmes' accreditation process was "complicated", "overemphasized," and "subjective" and even "merciless".

The internal quality assurance systems of most institutions in our study are at the developmental stage. Non-university HEIs established internal quality assurance systems earlier than the universities. They are ahead of universities at the structural and procedural levels. However, a more holistic approach towards quality control needs to be developed. For example, there were institutions that have implemented ISO principles and such approach does not apply to teaching and learning activities. And conversely, some institutions that focus on teaching activities do not pay much attention to efficiency of decision-making mechanisms and quality of study support structures, and financial management. Some questions have yet to be explored such as: How effective are quality control instruments? Are processes in place "to close the loop of institutional quality practices" and implement changes based on self-assessment findings and/or feedback? Furthermore, there is no universal definition of *quality education* across higher education institutions, which indicates that developing a higher education quality culture, one of the aims of the Bologna Process, is absent from the departments we have studied. At the same time, existing external quality assurance practices seem to be looking for "faulty" programmes and eliminating them. Institutions that strive to have "the right" programmes adapt to external requirements, which leaves little room for creativity and for developing their own shared definition of quality.

4.3 Perceptions and practices of the three-cycle degree structures

While answering questions about structural changes in degree programme structures, none of the respondents doubted the necessity of the three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor, Master's

and Doctoral). This structure has existed in Lithuania for more than fifteen years, institutions of higher education consider it the natural degree system. The main topic of concern in HEIs is the length of the first two cycles of study programmes. In this respect the opinions of the university and college respondents differed. Most university professors and administrators favour the current length of bachelor studies — four years. They doubt that it can be shortened to three years and claim that it would reduce the quality of education. Moreover, academics will lose their jobs. A common view was expressed by one academic: “Study content will become rather narrow and superficial. Structurally it means a loss of academic staff”. They also favour the two-year Master’s degree programme and doubt whether it is technically possible to reduce it to one year or one-and-a-half years. Some university lecturers said they could accept a compromise of the five-year model for the first two levels (three and a half years for a Bachelor’s and one and a half years for a Master’s degree). One problem they cited was that the concept of learning outcomes of the Master’s studies is not clear: “We have no description saying what a Bachelor’s and what a Master’s degree is, and the difference between them”. Some respondents indicated that they understand Master’s level studies as a more creative approach to studying compared to the Bachelor’s, where students are trained to become researchers.

The college respondents tended to focus on different structural aspects of the degree structures. Contrary to the university staff, they generally favour the three-year Bachelor’s degree programme, as current studies in Lithuanian colleges last from three to three and a half years. Their main concern was the link between the first and the second degree cycles. Currently bachelor’s degree graduates have problems proceeding to Master’s degree studies because most colleges grant only the first-level degrees. If they want to obtain a Master’s degree, they must be accepted into a university. Usually to get into Lithuanian universities college graduates have to take additional courses, while in many other European universities they are accepted without any additional requirements. One college lecturer noted: “All our students should have an opportunity to continue their studies ... Our students of English, German and French languages have to leave for Master’s degree studies in other European countries”. Most college respondents said that they have no definite opinion about the appropriate length of Master’s and Doctoral programmes. Additionally, some college respondents favour introducing the Master’s degree in at least some of the colleges.

4.4 Mobility patterns in the five higher education institutions

In discussing student mobility, most of the respondents pointed out that it has increased during the recent years. They indicated that this was stimulated by the better knowledge of foreign languages, the increasing number of agreements with foreign institutions of higher

education, and the wider use of the credit transfer system. However, there are some differences between the two disciplines. Many of the computer science respondents mentioned that their students are working; therefore, it is often difficult for them to participate in the exchange programmes. They are unwilling to go abroad as they are afraid to lose their jobs and suffer financially. One of the academics reflected:

I must say that, in fact, the student mobility is rather limited; the situation could be better. The reasons are rather obvious, and they are mainly economical. Students would like to go, but the funding they receive is insufficient for living in other countries and they have to spend quite a lot of their own money. Another reason is student employment. If they leave for the whole semester, nobody will retain their jobs.

Academics in humanities usually didn't mention this as the main obstacle. They indicated that the number of students willing to go to foreign universities via exchange programmes increased, and the number of outgoing students often exceeds the number of students who come from abroad. However, in different institutions the proportion of incoming and outgoing students and teachers may vary. The case of University B can serve as a typical example. In 2008, the Faculty of Philology was the leader in the Erasmus exchange programme, sending and receiving the largest number of students and academic staff compared to the other faculties of the University. The Faculty of Computer Science was last in the rank, as in 2008, none of their students and teachers participated in the Erasmus scheme. The dynamics of international mobility during the last six years is presented in Table 3:

Table 3. International Mobility in University B in 2003-2008

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Incoming students	50	48	104	91	143	190
Incoming teachers	27	20	42	49	34	84
Outgoing students	118	138	175	148	128	171
Outgoing teachers	40	26	55	38	60	39
Total	235	232	376	326	365	484

Source: Institutional documents.

As we can observe, there is a steady increase of the number of students and academics participating in the study exchange programmes. In six years, the total number almost doubled. The number of incoming students and teachers experienced the most rapid growth, while the number of outgoing students and teachers reached its peak in 2005 and then slightly decreased. Lithuania joined the European Union in 2004, which perhaps provided more favourable mobility opportunities reflected by the exchange dynamics.

None of the respondents mentioned that the credit transfer mechanism causes any major problems. Lithuania has its own credit system that was introduced in the mid-1990s, which, by the formula, is easily transferable to the ECTS. A typical reaction of an academic was: “It doesn’t make any difference. When we issue student diploma supplements, we just multiply credits by 1.5. Not a big problem”. Therefore most of the people interviewed said that this is a mainly technical issue of counting ECTS into national credits for Lithuanian students who return back and transferring Lithuanian credits into ECTS for foreign students after they finish their studies in Lithuanian universities. Some of the respondents mentioned that it would behoove us in the country to switch completely to the ECTS system and that this change should have been done long ago. However, none of those interviewed pointed out that there are different principles of accumulating Lithuanian credits and ECTS. A Lithuanian credit means one working week or 40 hours of lectures, seminars, and independent work. After the 2009 Law on Higher Education, ECTS has become the official credit accumulation system in Lithuania.

4.5 Perceptions about and practices of student employability

Almost all respondents mentioned the importance of employability and meeting the needs of the labour market; however, the attitudes of the university and college staff members were slightly different. Certain differences were also observed between the foreign language and computer science departments. Humanitarians noted that for the Bachelor students, the labour market has less direct influence than for the Masters students. They also mentioned that they seek to provide a more universal education, not directly linked to the immediate needs of the labour market. While in computer science, academics noted that their students are always demanded by the labour market even during their undergraduate studies. It’s easy for them to find employment, and the main task is to adapt the study programmes in accordance with the development of modern information technologies. College representatives stressed their close ties with their social partners. One of the administrators reflected:

The network of our social partners is very wide and we try to develop it further in each study programme. Actually, we invite representatives of the employers to the defense of the graduate thesis and to our other activities, regularly keep contact with them.

College administrators noted that they follow the needs of the labour market based on the feedback received from their industrial and business partners, while university administrators did not refer to close connections to the labour market. Some of them mentioned that market research is needed; however, they stated that they lack information on labour market needs. In other words, they demonstrate a more passive approach toward labour market research than the

college respondents. One university professor regretted: “We somehow try to pay attention. The dean, heads of departments should keep closer contact ... But I think that the process is too slow”. Representatives of the private colleges pointed out that they are forced to think about the needs of their clients and their opportunities in the labour market, as the student fees are the main source of the college income.

Labour market discussion was closely linked with the theme of life-long learning (LLL) at the higher education institutions, another important goal of the Bologna Process. Although only few interviewees related LLL to the Bologna Process (mostly in colleges), academics and administrators recognize the need for continuous education and distance learning. Higher education institutions have adult learning programmes. In addition, the institutions have professional training courses for their academic staff since they deem the qualifications of the staff to be important for their institutions. An administrator in one of the colleges expressed a typical view:

Our major activity is teaching. Then goes re-qualification of staff and life-long learning and adult education. Through new competencies we offer many new services, although the receiver of these services is not always able to pay for them. It is a pity; therefore, we try to look for alternative ways of how to provide such services with the help of the EU structural funds. We provide services to the training centre of the labour market exchange.

5 Discussion – Lithuanian higher education system in the European context

So far higher education reform in Lithuania has been rather incremental and can be characterized as the negotiation between two strong powers: the state and the academic oligarchy. However, due to a number of reasons, not in the least the EU accession, the higher education sector became a topic of particular importance. The structural changes according to the Bologna Process, including the introduction of the ECTS, the establishment of the quality assurance system, and the introduction of the Diploma supplement, were at the forefront of the Bologna related reforms in Lithuania in the 1990s. Moreover, a three-cycle degree structure was created at the beginning of the 1990s. The implementation of the new study structures had a national character with some international influence (Leisyte, 2008).

A substantial part of the Bologna reforms has been understood in different ways among the interviewed administrators and academics of universities and colleges in Lithuania. Lecturers and even heads of departments demonstrate a rather fragmented understanding of the process. They usually point out one single aspect of the process. However, administrators have a broader understanding of the Bologna Process. They see it as a multifaceted process of structural changes, enhancement of quality, and changing mobility in their higher education institution, in particular,

and participating in the European Higher Education Area in a broader sense.

The Bologna Process has been a major driving force in quality related matters as we can observe from our data. At present, national higher education reform continues to bring new developments to the QA system and procedures. External evaluation of programmes has been carried out since the late 90's. The first external institutional assessments were carried out in 2005. Recently, institutional assessment is gaining more importance and will likely play a key role in external quality assurance schemes. Although our case studies show that, in general, external evaluation has been a positive factor, the perceptions of HEIs show a number of issues that still need to be resolved. Academics wish a more collegial form of evaluation and a less stringent legal environment. External regulations and study programme guidelines leave increasingly less room for autonomy, creativity, flexibility, and differentiation of programme form and content. On the one hand, higher education in Lithuania is over-regulated; on the other hand, there is not enough clarity about the expected outcomes. Certain forms of higher education provisions are not regulated by the law, e.g., distance education, which means that higher education institutions do not have the right to offer distance education degrees. Academic administrators are concerned that there is still ambiguity between degrees (professional vs. academic, Bachelor vs. Master). As one administrator noted: "It is necessary to clarify 'who is preparing what'". In the policy makers' view, however, higher education institutions enjoy a high degree of autonomy: "Institutional autonomy is very high. In particular cases it becomes a problem of the whole society. Institutions of higher education and research *are free to choose* the type and way of implementation of their internal quality assurance systems" (ENQA Convergence Study 2005).

Quality assurance processes are perceived as part of the Bologna Process largely by the interviewed administrators. Many respondents think a more systemic view on quality assurance is perceived as needed at the institutional level. In their view, a closer collaboration among HEIs, best-practice sharing, and a consultative role of quality assurance agencies could help to implement needed changes. To some extent, the introduction of institutional evaluation has been a step towards a more comprehensive review and the first step from the 'auditing' towards the 'evaluative' quality culture.

Looking at the mobility figures and comments on this from our respondents, we can see a clear trend of increased outgoing students and academic staff in the foreign language departments, while the computer science departments' student and academic staff mobility numbers are consistently low. Despite the fact that the ECTS has been functioning and there are possibilities for students to go to other European countries, computer science students already participate in the local labour market and do not want to lose their jobs and incur financial losses by going abroad for a short term study. Moreover, there is usually a higher number of outgoing rather than incoming students and academic staff.

In terms of employability, all departments were aware of the need to adjust to the needs of the market. This was especially true in colleges. Both college administrators and academics completely understood the need to ensure the 'applied' side of their degree programmes. This is not surprising given the mandate of colleges as opposed to that of universities and the varied age and institutionalization of universities and colleges. Furthermore, both disciplines, foreign languages and computer science, lend themselves to application. Thus, it is not too surprising that this dimension of the Bologna Process is rather visible in our case studies, although not as much in universities as in colleges. Finally, employability discussions were related to the life-long learning (LLL) theme in our interviews. Adult learning programmes and professional training of academic staff were the primary examples of LLL, although not many academics related LLL to the Bologna Process.

6 Conclusions

The preliminary results of the study suggest that (1) there are different interpretations of Bologna reforms at the institutional level between administrators and academics; (2) quality assurance procedures are related to the national quality assurance policies as well as internal drive for improvement of higher education institutions, which is especially visible among colleges; (3) half of the academic staff not involved in managerial roles are largely unaware of the Bologna Process (especially true for junior academic staff); one-third of the academic staff link the quality assurance procedures to the Bologna Process; (4) the newer higher education institutions (colleges and one university) were more active in adopting Bologna related structural and content changes than the traditional university; (5) similarities and differences can be seen between the perceptions of the Bologna Process between the two disciplines: foreign languages and computer science.

In terms of similarities, all case studies have experienced changes in the degree structure and credit transfer system, and have participated in a range of internal and external quality assurance procedures. The majority of academic staff has an episodic view of the Bologna Process. In most cases, they relate it to the changes in the mobility of students and staff, two-cycle degree structures, or quality assurance processes within their institutions.

The differences between the perceptions among the different disciplines mainly have to do with mobility and quality assurance procedures. Although both disciplinary departments perceive changes in mobility mostly as a positive development, the computer scientists observe a low participation rate in the exchange programmes of their students since they are more connected to the national labour market and do not need to go abroad. The foreign languages departments are

keen on sending their students abroad and find the increase in mobility numbers very useful. Programme accreditation is another area where academics from the two disciplines have differences in perceptions. While computer scientists do not have problems with their programmes being accredited, the foreign language departments have restrictions on their programme accreditation and are not satisfied with such a situation. Foreign language departments expressed their concern about 'state regulation' of the quality of their programmes and the 'audit culture'.

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