

Bachelor's and Master's degrees: One and the same thing? A case study of implementing the degree system in Romania**

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of a system based on cycles has been one of the core action lines in the Bologna Process. It represents the base for promoting student mobility, employability, and international competitiveness. The implementation of the degree-cycle system – conditioned by the achievement of other policy objectives (i.e. ECTS) – started hot debates on multiple levels including on the relevance of different study stages, or the extent to which the curricular emphasis would differ between the two levels. After almost two decades since the reform has been introduced, rather than looking at the state of implementation, current research should focus on how the reform has been implemented and what are its effects. By using the Romanian case as an illustration of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), this paper aims to answer the following questions: to what extent have the intentions and expectations linked to the introduction of a tiered structure of degrees have been fulfilled and what are some the (unintended) effects of such reforms? Based on a series of interviews done in November 2017 with academic staff, student representatives and decision-makers from Romania, this paper presents an analysis of the deliberate intentions and expectations of the introduction of the degree structure. The conclusions show that issues related to (1) financing; (2) quality (3) access and participation; (4) content and curricula (5) career path and opportunities after graduation are the main implications of the implementation of the degree-cycle system.

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KEYWORDS

Bologna Process, degree cycles, higher education, policy implementation, Romania

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the Bologna Process was to continue the legacy of the [Sorbonne Declaration \(1998\)](#) and ‘to create a European area of higher education, where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally of its citizens’ ([Sorbonne Declaration, 1998](#), p. 3). More specifically, the Sorbonne Declaration emphasized the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the goals of promoting citizens’ mobility and employability and Europe’s overall development. The [Bologna Declaration \(1999\)](#) puts forward a set of six objectives which the ministers of education (of that time) across the region agreed that they represent a necessary condition for the consolidation the EHEA and for promoting the European higher education system across the world:

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degree.
2. Adoption of a system based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.
3. Establishment of a system of credits.
4. Promotion of mobility.
5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance.
6. Promotion of the European dimensions in higher education.

The adoption of a system based on cycles (comparable degrees) has been one of the core action lines of the Bologna Process. It represents the base for promoting student mobility, employability, and international competitiveness. Initially, two cycles have been initiated: undergraduate and graduate. The difference between the two is that the former should last at least three years and should give access to the labour market, representing, therefore, the student’s level of qualification, whereas the second cycle is preconditioned by the completion of the first, and should lead to further studies (Master or Doctorate). A third cycle was introduced in 2003 ([Berlin Communiqué, 2003](#)) to create further links between research and higher education, including the European Research Area. It is claimed that research and research training are necessary elements for maintaining and improving EHEA’s quality, attractiveness and competitiveness. Similar reasons are invoked when referring to the need for improving ‘the status, career prospects and funding for early-stage researchers’ ([London Communiqué, 2005](#), p. 4). But research in the EHEA is not only about knowledge, innovation and creativity but also about teaching and learning. The study programs and disciplines should, therefore, reflect the existing research priorities and should be linked to teaching and learning strategies and outcomes ([Bucharest Communiqué, 2012](#)).

What are the degree cycles about?

The difference between the first cycle (undergraduate or Bachelor) and the second cycle (graduate or Master) is that the former should last at least three years and should give access on the labour market, whereas the second cycle is preconditioned by the completion of the first, and



should lead to further studies (i.e. Doctorate). More specifically, the first cycle leads to a qualification which is obtained after successful completion of a study programme with 180–240 ECTS credits. The duration of such programs is typically three years. The second cycle, the Master, leads to a qualification which is obtained after successful completion of a study programme with 60–120 ECTS credits. According to the Bologna Working Group (2005), the Bachelor and Master's degrees are awarded to students who meet the following generic qualifications descriptors (Table 1):

In a nutshell, the degree awarded after the first and second cycle shall lead to further studies and be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The significance of the first cycle is to offer programs with varied content, practice and academic orientation, that makes equally possible the entry to the labour market and continuing of studies at Master level (Hrubos, 2003). The intended difference between the two, on the one hand, is that the Bachelor studies offer students programs with general and varied content, academic orientation and practical knowledge (Witte, 2006), whereas the Master's degree delivers the high-level skills required by the knowledge economy and offers specific professional knowledge, training students as researchers.

While the Bachelor education has a long tradition, in Europe the Master's education is an important recent development which aimed to bring significant new promises in higher education. With almost all European universities awarding Master's degrees, students are expected to continue with a Master's program right after their undergraduate studies. Despite

Table 1. A framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education area

Generic descriptors	Bachelor (180–240 ECTS)	Master (90–120 ECTS)
Basis of knowledge	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle
Applicability of knowledge	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation	Can apply their knowledge and problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader contexts related to their field of study
Skills	Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data to inform judgements that include a reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences	Have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;
Experience	Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy	Have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous

Source: Bologna Working Group (2005).



this, it is not exactly clear what the ultimate aim of such a degree is, and what purposes it should serve.

Higher Education Institutions' response

Following the introduction of the degree cycles, higher education institutions proved to be somewhat receptive. According to the Trends III report (2003)¹ – which was mainly based on a survey among higher education institutions – out of 900 institutional responses one third had a tiered system before 1999, and one fifth of these institutions started implementing the cycles in the first 3 years after their official adoption at the Bologna Process level.

The provisions regarding the implementation of the degree cycles left a high degree of flexibility to the participating countries on how they would like to meet these requirements. Both in size and content! This implied changes in the length of the study periods, the relationship between the cycles, changes in curricula and study programs, etc.

Romania, together with other CEE countries such as Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, Poland or Slovakia, has adopted the 180 + 120 credit (3 + 2 academic years) cycle model representing the Bachelor and Master level. In order to understand the level of flexibility European countries had in this respect, Table 2 presents some cases of the pre and post-Bologna degree structures in Portugal, Sweden and Romania.

Some of the tools/instruments for making degrees more readable, comparable or compatible refer to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the qualifications frameworks, the Diploma Supplement, and to aspects related to recognition. The history of the ECTS started in 1988 as a result of the increasing number of mobile students within the Erasmus programme. The reasons for its introduction refer mainly to the value added it brings for recognizing student workload and learning outcomes at a specific institution, and the impact

Table 2. The pre and post-Bologna degree structures in selected EHEA countries

Country	Pre-Bologna	Post-Bologna
Portugal	<i>Bacharelato</i> (3 years) <i>Licenciatura</i> (5 years) <i>Mestrado</i> (<i>Licenciatura</i> + 2–3 years postgr. studies)	<i>Licenciatura</i> (3 years) <i>Mestrado</i> (<i>Licenciatura</i> + 2 years) (Integrated Master's)
Sweden	<i>Kandidat</i> (3 years) <i>Magister</i> (4 years) <i>Licentiat</i> (<i>magister</i> + 2–3 years postgr. studies)	<i>Kandidat</i> (3 years) <i>Master</i> (5 years)
Romania	<i>Invatamant universitar de scurta durata</i> (3 years) <i>Invatamant universitar de lunga durata</i> (4–6 years) Short postgr. programmes (1–2 years)	<i>Licență</i> (3–4 years) <i>Master</i> (1–2 years)

¹Since 1999, the European University Association has been publishing the Trends reports, with a view to feeding an institutional perspective into European higher education policy discussions and improving exchange and networking among European universities and support across them.



this has on employability. The ECTS is a measure for student workload in terms of learning processes and outcomes; it provides information on the duration of the program, its components, or the hours required for preparation. Generally speaking, an academic year consists of 60 ECTS. The readability and comparability of degrees or cycles imply therefore that for each cycle there is a certain number of ECTS for Bachelor (180–240 ECTS), Masters (60–120 ECTS) and PhD programs (no range).

The idea of developing qualification frameworks is rooted in the Bologna Process' principles of flexibility, transparency and openness. As in the case of ECTS, qualification frameworks (QFs) provide information and guidance on what is expected from a student to know, understand and do, given a specific level of qualification or degree (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Doctorate). QFs provide information about the different levels of qualifications and the interaction between them, and how students can gain access to different levels of qualifications. The QF-EHEA cycles 1, 2 and 3 or Bachelor, Master and Doctorate, correspond to the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning levels 6, 7 and 8, or to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 6, 7, 8. The main aim of QFs is to provide support in developing both study programs and degree systems and to facilitate the recognition of the acquired qualifications. As mentioned above, qualifications and their recognition are crucial for both students and employers.

The Diploma Supplement combines all the above elements in a document attached to the diploma (an annex), as a way to certify an integrated set of information on student's learning outcomes. More specifically, it provides information on the holder of the diploma, on the qualification achieved (including its context, level and function), the contents or the objects of study and the results achieved, and lastly, information on the country issuing the supplement higher education's system. A general observation is that the Diploma Supplement is in its turn a tool for recognition which has acquired a substantial reference in policy documents, including the Lisbon Recognition convention (LRC).

In conclusion, the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees represents a way that structures the implementation of learning outcomes within the Bologna Process. Understanding learning outcomes and making use of them are a precondition for the 'success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – all of which are interdependent' (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012, p. 3).

The adoption of a system based on cycles has been one of the core action lines in the Bologna Process. After almost two decades since the reform has been introduced, rather than looking at the state of implementation, current research should focus on how the reform has been implemented and what are its effects. By using the Romanian case as an illustration of the situation in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) this paper aims to answer to what extent have the intentions and expectations linked to the introduction of a tiered structure of degrees have been fulfilled.

Scholarly interest in the Bologna degree system

Recently, it has been shown that there a growing interest in assessing the level of implementation of the Bologna Process agreed on policies and their impact at the national level. A bird's-eye view shows that there are several types of implementation documents and studies. As such, a first category looks at the *level* of implementation. In this category are situated mainly the Bologna Process implementation reports, the Trends (tracking the progress of Bologna implementation within a two-year timescale), or the national implementation reports. A second



category looks at the *path* taken by different countries or policies across time (i.e. steepness, stagnation). The *level* of implementation has been of interest for the stakeholders involved in the Bologna Process and therefore through the different reporting mechanisms (national reports, Bologna Implementation reports, Trends, Stocktaking reports), a continuous assessment of the implementation stages has been set up.

Broadly speaking, a large stream of literature has been interested in exploring the state of implementation of the degree structures (Heitmann, 2005; Patricio & Harden, 2009) in specific fields of study (e.g. engineering, health, law). One of these streams looks at the stage of implementation ‘in accordance with the Bologna principles’ (Kehm, 2006; Sin, 2012).

The implementation of the degree-cycle system started hot debates on multiple levels, including on the relevance of different study stages, or the extent to which the curricular emphasis would differ between the Bachelor and Master’s levels. Besides these, Szolár (2011, p. 86) mentions that there were discussions also on the type of institutions that can offer higher degree levels, but also on the existence of different types – academic and professional – of master programs and the transition between the stages etc.

Another stream of literature looks at student enrolment in programmes following the cycle structure (Teichler, 2012), students’ perception on their employability potential (Sin, Taveres, & Amaral, 2016) or at the relationship between the duration of studies and dropout (Lerche, 2016). This is strongly related to unintended effects some of the scholars (Reichert, 2010) have been touching upon.

In the very first years of the Bologna Process there have been many discussions on the benefits of the implementation of the degree structure and the potential problems it could address among which such issues as: transparency, lengthy university studies, a lack of comparability in the European degree structures (and therefore an impediment to mobility), student and graduates’ placement in the labour market, inflexible curricula, etc. The degree system was thought to help contribute to reducing the huge variety of national higher education degrees that existed across Europe. This was one of the greatest obstacles to student mobility and the recognition of degrees and study periods. After almost 20 years since the Bologna Declaration and the introduction of this reform – the question is not to what extent the countries have implemented the degree system, but how they have done so and what are the effects after implementation?

Implementing the degree cycles and their outcomes

The main argument this paper puts forward is the fact that despite actors’ and institutions’ role in policy design and implementation, the characteristics of the policy to be implemented predicts the potential effects it can bring about. The characteristics of the policy to be adopted matters from various perspectives, including whether it fits or not existing policies, institutions or practices; whether it is needed to solve an existing problem; and whether it is clear what it aims to achieve and how it should be put in practice.

While some countries take the Bologna Process policies verbatim when adopting them, others reinterpret them before adopting. This reinterpretation might be due to the legislative process which often requires ‘ambiguous language and contradictory goals to hold together a passing coalition’ (Matland, 1995, pp. 147–148). Nevertheless, the complexity of a policy or a program (multiple goals, issue salience, possible side effects, and outcome predictability) affects



its transferability (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). Considering the above, having a clear understanding of the characteristics of ‘what’ is transferred makes for a more nuanced understanding of the results.

Paul Cairney (2011, p. 35) in his book ‘Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues’ provides several criteria that can help in explaining the array of implementation successes or failures. For Cairney (2011) the policy objectives should be clear, consistent and well communicated and understood by the policy protagonists and targets. The inability of policymakers to formulate and design clear and stable directions with respect to the desired policy change can undermine local implementation (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1974). According to Hrebiniak (2006), the policy formulation stage is crucial, even if there is a good execution from the side of the implementers, unclear formulation (with specific objectives) will lead to failure or unintended results. This paper focuses on how the degree cycle has been implemented in Romania and what are its effects.

METHOD AND CASE SELECTION

At the European level, the Bologna Process has been hailed for opening up a dialogue space for higher education policy where different types and levels of actors cooperate towards a common goal. The Bologna Process has played an important role for the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), considering the democratization and modernization of their higher education systems, but also because of their efforts towards European integration (Szolár, 2011). In a chapter I have co-authored on Bologna Process policy transfer within in Central and Eastern Europe (Matei, Craciun, & Torotcoi, 2017), we argue that most CEE countries have been engaged in structural reform processes and therefore have looked for practices and models which could work in their country contexts. Instead of borrowing or experimenting with higher education models from other regions, or develop their home-grown models, CEE countries joined the emerging European model put forward by the Bologna Process.

Across the board, it can be reasonably argued that the Bologna Process was a success in Central and Eastern Europe (Kozma, 2014): it enhanced the electoral prospects and reputation of governments and provided them with political benefits, it helped to control the policy agenda in higher education and eased the business of governing, and it promoted the government’s preferred trajectory. As some commentators have observed, the Bologna Process is often used by leaders to forward national political purposes or further broad values held by the government a priori to ministerial meetings. As Harmsen noted, a national official participating in the Bologna decision-making process confided that ‘you put something on the agenda because it suits your own domestic needs (. . .) It creates pressure to follow up a commitment you made in the first place. It is a bit of a chicken and egg question’ (2015, p. 790).

Based on a series of semi-structured interviews done in November 2017 with academic staff, student representatives and national and institutional decision-makers from Romania, this paper aims to answer to what extent are the intentions and expectations linked to the introduction of a tiered structure of degrees have been fulfilled. In terms of institutional profile the interviews have been conducted with top higher education institutions from Romania representing different geographical areas (represent diverse educational centres in the main regions of the country) and rather similar institutional profiles (comprehensive universities with advanced



research and education). Generally speaking, interviewees were asked about their understanding of the Bologna Process and how familiar they are with it, how they have been contributing (or not) to creating a shared understanding and implementation at the national or at the institutional level, and what they consider as main challenges and opportunities in implementation.

While the Romanian case is not representative of the whole CEE region, it aims to provide an illustration of some of the possible challenges neighbouring countries might encounter (especially those with similar historical, political, social and cultural similarities, such as, for example, Moldova).

Analysis and results

As in most of the EHEA countries, the Bologna Process has been embraced both positively and negatively by the Romanian universities and higher education experts. As a former student representative and rector advisor puts it: 'those of who understood what the Process is about are also for it, and those who see it just as a bureaucratic process which aims to reduce the number of study years cannot see the added value of such a reform process. I think people started step-by-step to understand the added value of it' (Interviewee #1). Student representatives, however, have a clear stance on the Bologna: 'we cannot be against the Bologna Process, we can be against the implementation model' (Interviewee #2) meaning the Bologna Process brings along favourable policies and reforms for the Romanian students and higher education system. However, if a comprehensive and consistent implementation approach is missing, the intended outcomes are not surfacing, leading to negative attitudes.

According to the Ministry of Education website, in Romania higher education is delivered through around 100 higher education institutions which can be universities, academies and institutes that have provisional authorization or full accreditation. These can be public (around 50%), private or confessional, they have legal personality and are non-profit, apolitical. HEIs autonomy is guaranteed through the Romanian Constitution and academic freedom through laws. Despite the legal provision allocating 6% of the GDP to education, data from the last ten years shows that this never went beyond 3.2%, Romania being significantly below the EU averages. Depending on their focus universities are categorized as either (advanced) education and research or only education. In line with the Bologna Process, higher education is structured under the model BA (3 years), MA (2 years), and PhD studies (3 years). Annually, the government validates among others the fields and specializations of study programs, the number of ECTS for each study program, and the maximum number of students to be enrolled. Access to higher education is conditioned upon a matura exam diploma (or equivalent), but HEIs can have additional admission processes. Gross enrolment data shows that student numbers have been in decline from 2007 to 2013, and currently a slight increase of around 50%.

It is widely acknowledged that Romania has been among those 'hard-working' countries from the region: 'if in the CEE countries it took 10–15 years until the Bologna Declaration objectives have been implemented, in Romania things have been done from one day to another, overnight. For example, a law has been adopted which was stipulating that starting with this year we will have BA, MA, PhD – after this stipulation all the universities had to adjust and implement the law' (Interviewee #3). However, this fast adjustment comes with certain shortcomings. As one of the former Romanian ministers of education mentioned, the reform process has been done with a lack of proper preparation



[the Bologna Process] was not discussed in the right moment. It was not an option as long as we have signed to accept an option. We signed, we said, we are in, and we participated in it. If you enter just a game, you assume the consequences, and you play. If you assume this game, you have to prepare' (Interviewee #4).

Besides being a reflection of the policy-making processes at that particular moment, the lack of preparedness and proper debates and discussions in the academic environment about the reform to be implemented made Romania follow the 'dead letters' approach in which 'the form chapter is fine. However, when it comes to content, there are big problems' a quality assurance manager said (Interviewee #5), meaning that the legislation adopted is not reflected in national action plans or concrete measures at the university level.

A legislation adopted in 2004 in Romania (Law 288 from 24 June 2004) led to full implementation of a two-cycle degree structure from the 2005 to 2006 academic year onwards. At the same time, ECTS (in use since 1998) and the Diploma Supplement became mandatory. For Romania, this process signifies 'a core restructuring of the content in view to make it compatible to the content from prestigious European universities' (Matei 2009, p. 5) but also an opportunity to modernize its curricula (Alesi, Burger, Kehm, & Teichler, 2005).

From the interviews, it came out that the introduction of the cycle system could have had two main rationales. On the one hand, this could have been a strategy from the policy-makers' perspective to shorten the numbers of years spent in school: 'if we would have stayed with the initial stage of 4 years of Bachelor and 1 year for Master would not have been ideal. One year of preparation for the Master was not enough, and this could not have been considered as a specialization per se which could ensure the possibility for professional development as a researcher or specialist' says a university pro-rector (Interviewee #6). With the pre-Bologna degree structure, the duration of the studies would be too long, and the labour market demand would not be met. On the other hand, it is claimed that through this new qualification system, the decision-makers thought that a new elite would make its place through the Master program: 'the Bachelor system is for everybody, but we will keep the Master's program to compensate for the desperation of the quality of education and keep the elite. It was a rather strange combination of the communist nostalgia, elitism and conservatism from a social point of view' says one of the interviewed deans (Interviewee #3).

Based on the conducted interviews several themes reoccurred as being the main effects and consequences of implementing the Bachelor and Master degree structure: (1) financing; (2) quality (3) access and participation; (4) content and curricula implications and (5) career path and opportunities after graduation.

Financing, quality, access and participation

In Romania, policy-making in higher education is very much about financing education; more specifically, how universities receive money is based on student numbers. This phenomenon leads to some kind of competition between universities, and it has also created a race for students by diversifying the study offers.

In conditions of higher education being underfinanced, universities are trying to do whatever they can to get aligned to the existing legislative frameworks and comply with them. For example, in some universities, money is distributed per programs, meaning a program should



receive a certain amount based on the number of students it enrolls. The quote from the person responsible for quality assurance in one of the interviewed universities, reflects the idea:

'if there is an MA program, the sum should be bigger, and if the program is in English the sum is bigger. . . If you do not have students, you do not have money; if you do not have money, you do not have how to pay your teachers. In Romania, teachers are employed for life – not like in the UK where you have short periods of 3–5 years. As a professor, you cannot let your students fail because you are directly affected. Considering that we get financed by student numbers, we accept almost everyone; we hold the students, and very few of them do not graduate: who enrolls also graduates, only who does not want does not graduate. Universities avoid losing students - this means we are dealing with mass education and this fits into what Bologna wants' (Interviewee #5).

Despite the 'mass education' phenomenon in most of the Romanian universities, the demographic trend is descending, and the number of people who can enrol for Bachelor studies dropped to under 100.000. Out of these, there is a percentage which does not go for university studies and another percentage which chooses to study abroad. Most of those who enrol for Bachelor studies do not graduate, therefore there is a high dropout rate, and on top of this, some students do not want to continue for a Master degree.

The dropout rate has been attributed to the system, which is believed that it is not designed to help students choose what they would like to study. 'You enrol to something, but you have no clue what it is about. Universities are harsh - in their search for students, they will present you a certain aspect of the specialization you want to go to' says one of the student representatives (Interviewee #2). In order to address this issue in their university, the student representatives are organizing for several years a summer university which aims to help high school students get familiar with the university and the program they would like to study in. Another reason for the dropout is that a high school graduate is sent to a narrow specialization which should be a Master program. The effect is that many students leave after the 1st year. Some of them start over again but these students are not allowed to continue on state-subsidized places.

From the data collected, it became evident that most of the universities have issues in filling the state-subsidized places for the Master's programs. One of the troubles here is that the Ministry of Education had a rather 'random preferential' distribution of the state-subsidized places, some of those subsidized places are not filled. While prominent and prestigious universities are struggling every year to hold their MA programs, some other universities from smaller cities have no problems having extra subsidized places.

Another important aspect here is that the number of MA programs is rather large, with great competition among different universities in competing for a somewhat decent number of students, between 10 and 20 per program. With few exceptions, the quality of such programs is rather low, with courses held in the evening (since most of the student work and cannot attend classes during the day), usually with less classes compared to what is stipulated on paper, with cases in which classes are not held at all either because there is an agreement between the professors and the students or because students do not show up (Interviewee #2, #4, #5).

While universities have the freedom to set up their admission procedures for access to the Master level, most of them choose to enrol as many students as possible without setting up high standards. In some cases, the students who have been enrolled in Bachelor studies within the same university are 'encouraged' to apply for a Master's degree in the same field at the same university. The idea is reflected in the quote below coming from an alumnus of one of the interviewed universities:



‘...even though we had the Bologna Process implemented at the university level, in my faculty [informatics] they used to tell us that our Bachelor studies would not be recognized if we do not go for a master program in the same faculty’ (Interviewee #1).

Last but not least, there is a lot of pressure on universities to be efficient from an economic point of view: ‘there was a time when a minimum number of students was required for running a Master program – the rector decided how many. In the summer, we have no clue what Master programs we will have in the autumn’ said one of the interviewed professors (Interviewee #7). This creates situations in which teachers are asked to teach or come up with a course right away without having a proper departmental discussion on what is going to be taught.

Content and curricula changes and consequences

While there was no apparent intention to change the design of the study programs, many countries have interpreted the implementation of the degree structure as an opportunity to ‘modernize’ their curricula. This aspect and the increasing competition between universities created incrementally more and more narrow specializations. For example, in one of the universities, the Political Economy department within the Economic Sciences and Business Management Faculty has specializations such as Environmental and Food Economics – which in other countries would be a Master Program. One of the interviewed professors provides a context of the situation:

‘The Bologna Process has the problem of early specializations for people who have graduated high school and have no idea what they want. The 3-year system fits for getting in contact with quite different things which should actually be the content for a Master program. Of course, we cannot move back but what can be done is to have a system of major and minor, something more flexible when it comes to course choices’ (Interviewee #8).

Asked about the changes and consequences the degree cycles brought for Romania, a former Minister of Education claims that Romania did not succeed to move forward compared to what it had before 2005, and this relates to curricula but also to the coherence and consistency of competency-based learning and the way of structuring it:

‘from the Romanian experience, what followed from curricula point of view was an “agglomeration” of what we have done before, without readjusting, restructuring; we did not look at the cycles as we should. We have made many mistakes, especially in the way we have implemented the MA cycle. In my opinion this is a big loss and continues to be, and again, this is a wrong approach from both the academic and the labour market perspective’.

Indeed, some of the professors who could experience the pre and post-Bologna changes claim that the number of subjects declined, without having a compensating strategy. Reducing subjects, changing names of courses, having fewer hours for teaching and learning, have all affected the quality of education. ‘In most of the cases, the faculties are not prepared to offer MA programs and what we chose to do is to slightly adjust the content we are teaching for the BA level, without having a common strategy for each cycle. On the one hand, we encourage our Bachelor students to apply for a Master program with us, and at the same time, we have new students from other universities or even other fields of study. We are trying to build a common ground. However, most of the professors choose to teach the material they have already prepared for the Bachelor’ (Interviewee #8).



Career paths and opportunities after the Bachelor and Master programs

The strongest aspect of a completed Bachelor program is that it allows graduates to spend less time than before in a certain program and therefore presents greater flexibility for further professional development. Moreover, the students can do a ‘continuation Master,’ that is a Master undertaken immediately following, or very soon after, a Bachelor qualification in the same discipline. As mentioned above, pursuing a continuation Master within the same university and faculty can have negative consequences since most of the material has been already taught. Positioned between the Bachelor and the Doctorate, a Master program finds its usefulness very hard on the labour market; there is no connection between a Bachelor and Master and the payment/salary one receives. It is instead a tool for changing careers or getting professionalized in a specific area.

This aspect of not valorising the MA programs has been referred to by a former staff of the Romanian National Quality Assurance Agency, a professor at the time of the interview, who claimed that except reducing the curricula from 4–5 years to 3–4 years nothing else had been done. ‘The MA programs have not achieved yet the high-level standards of quality and prestige. Unfortunately, the academic world is one of the most resistant and traditional ones’ he added (Interviewee 9).

One of the student representatives claimed that it is rather problematic the way in which the MA programs are structured:

‘instead of being a proper transition to PhD – we repeat some courses we have done in our Bachelor’s. The Diploma Supplement shows that some universities cannot be compared in terms of the content of their MA programs with similar titles. As such, similar degrees cannot be compared and when it comes to PhD studies, many supervisors complain that the quality of students is not so high’ (Interviewee #2).

Last but not least, the fact that in Romania there is no differentiation between different types of MA programs (e.g. research, professional) makes it difficult to name the skills students get after completion. While an increasing orientation of taught Master’s degrees can be noticed towards professional rather than academic subjects, the evolving profile of Master’s students as mature, with professional experience and already with a career starts to get shape in Romania.

CONCLUSIONS

Romania has taken substantial voluntary steps for aligning its policies to the ones promoted by the Bologna Process - fundamental reforms took place, including legal adjustments, new national policies and structures, but also more clear guidelines and regulations for higher education institutions themselves. Among the factors that facilitated this alignment is worth mentioning the supportive legal framework, a close interaction between governmental bodies and ministries and higher education institutions, students, and teachers. One of the challenges mentioned is that the academic communities have limited or partial understanding of the Bologna Process principles.

Some of the conclusions for the specific case of the degree system show that the policy translation of the degree structure has been done in a marathon, without having a vision of the system, more specifically without sufficiently differentiating the curriculum between the



Bachelor and Master level. Instead of being offered a general understanding of their field, high-school graduates would be directly exposed to niche subjects and specific departments such as Economic Informatics.

Secondly, most of the Bachelor students are encouraged to do a consecutive or continuation Master (a Master undertaken immediately after a Bachelor qualification in the same discipline at the same university), which makes Master students, in most of the cases, find themselves repeating some of the courses in their Bachelor.

On the one hand, the pressure from the Bologna Process level to comply with the degree structure as a way to produce a higher degree of compatibility and comparability between the domestic and foreign universities has been done without considering how this system would fit into the Romanian socio-economic context. On the other hand, in-depth analysis and differentiation of the two degrees is entirely missing in the Romanian case, a fact which is reflected in the duplication of curricula.

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