

УДК 331

DOI 10.21685/2072-3016-2018-2-16

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STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR THE RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN REGION¹

Abstract.

Background. Lifelong learning, quality of education, recognition of flexible learning paths, access to higher education – these challenges are discussed at various international platforms and forums. The article focuses on the formation of the European higher education area by 2020, where academic mobility and joint educational programs will play a key role, which can contribute to the quality of higher education and reduce unemployment among young people in the geopolitical space.

Materials and methods. The implementation of research tasks was achieved on the basis of the analysis of international legal documents, which determined the priority tasks in the field of education quality assessment and recognition of foreign education. The methodological potential includes methods of comparative legal analysis, which allow to compare the content and importance for the development of the theory and practice of regulation of priorities in the field of education quality assessment and recognition of foreign education.

Results. The formation and development of the Bologna reforms in terms of providing students and graduates with the opportunity to move in the European higher education area with the recognition of their qualifications and periods of study.

Conclusions. The study of strategic priorities for the recognition of foreign education and the quality of education in the European region allows us to understand the reasons, reasons and content in terms of providing students and graduates with the opportunity to move in the European space with the recognition of their qualifications and periods of study. Further improvement of higher education systems and more active participation of the academic community in this process is necessary to realize the full potential of the European higher education area.

Key words: the quality of education, recognition of foreign education, learning throughout life, European space.

¹ Исследование проведено при поддержке гранта РФФИ (проект 18-29-15043).

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Аннотация.

Актуальность и цели. Обучение в течение всей жизни, качество образования, признание гибких траекторий обучения, доступ к высшему образованию – эти вызовы обсуждаются на различных международных площадках и форумах. В статье особое внимание уделяется формированию к 2020 г. Европейского пространства высшего образования, где ключевую роль будут играть академическая мобильность и совместные образовательные программы, что может способствовать повышению качества высшего образования и уменьшению безработицы в молодежной среде в геополитическом пространстве.

Материалы и методы. Реализация исследовательских задач была достигнута на основе анализа международных правовых документов, определивших приоритетные задачи в области оценки качества образования и признания иностранного образования. Методологический потенциал включает методы сравнительно-правового анализа, которые позволяют сопоставить содержание и значение для развития теории и практики регулирования приоритетных задач в области оценки качества образования и признания иностранного образования.

Результаты. Исследовано становление и развитие Болонских реформ в части предоставления студентам и выпускникам возможности перемещения в Европейском пространстве высшего образования с признанием их квалификаций и периодов обучения.

Выводы. Изучение стратегических приоритетных направлений по признанию иностранного образования и обеспечению качества образования в европейском регионе позволяет уяснить причины, основания и содержание в части предоставления студентам и выпускникам возможности перемещения в Европейском пространстве с признанием их квалификаций и периодов обучения. Дальнейшее совершенствование систем высшего образования и более активное участие академического сообщества в этом процессе являются необходимыми для реализации потенциала Европейского пространства высшего образования в полном объеме.

Ключевые слова: качество образования, признание заграничного образования, непрерывное образование, Европейское пространство.

The learning throughout life, the quality of education, recognition of flexible “learning pathways”, access to the higher education are the challenges which are discussed in different international platforms and forums nowadays. This way the Fourth Bologna strategic forum in the frame of Conference of ministries of higher education (Erevan, 14–15 of may, 2015) was focused on strengthening of cooperation between the European Higher Education Area (further EHEA) and countries of Middle East, South Africa and Asia, which border with EHEA countries. The importance of higher education transformation to confront modern socio-demographic and economic challenges is discussed as well by the international BRICS associations, “Forum Asia-Europe” (ASEM), ASEAN. The reforms in higher education should improve its quality, and reduce unemployment, especially among young people, and first of all among young women. During the Bologna Forum in 2015

the attention was paid to the role of structural reforms, where the scheme of academic mobility and the joint educational programs were included.

Nowadays European area is opposed to the ongoing economic and social crisis, the critical level of unemployment, the increasing youth marginalization, demographic changes, the new types of migration, to the conflicts within and between States and to the extremism and radicalization. From the other side the huge students and teachers mobility is promoted the mutual understanding, since the fast of knowledge and technology development that affects to the society and the economy, plays an increasingly important role in the higher education and scientific research transformation [1–7].

In this context, the participants of the Conference in Erevan, have noticed that they are determined to achieve a European Area by 2020; Where automatic recognition of qualification has become a reality, so that students and graduates can move easily throughout it; where the higher education is contributing effectively to build inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights; and where educational opportunities provide the competences and skills required for European citizenship, innovation and employment. The support of higher educational institutions in enhancing their efforts to promote intercultural understanding, critical thinking, political and religious tolerance, gender equality and democratic and civic values in order to strengthen European and global citizenship and lay the foundations for inclusive societies were also intended. And of course, it is required to strengthen the links between EHEA and the European Research Area.

In view of foregoing, the participants of Conference identified a desire to achieve the following equally important objectives in the new context:

- The increasing of quality and relevance of education and teaching, which is the EHEA principal mission;
- Fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives;
- The developing of more inclusive educational systems;
- The implementing agreed structural reforms is a prerequisite for successful EHEA process.

Those priorities have become the basis for the Yerevan communiqué.

The common system of degrees and system of credits, the common standards and guidelines on quality assurance, cooperation in the field of mobility and joint programs and degrees are the basis for the EHEA. While the commitments for creation a more efficient policy on recognition of credits, foreign qualifications for academic and professional purpose and prior learning has been made.

The commitments in compliance with which the national legislations should be adapted are endorsed in Yerevan communiqué and are the followings:

- To ensure, in collaboration with institutions, reliable and meaningful information on graduates career patterns and progression in the labor market, which should be provided to institutional leaders, potential students and their parents and society at large;
- To review national legislation with a view to fully complying with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, reporting to the Bologna Secretariat;
- To remove obstacles to the prior learning recognition for the purpose of providing access to higher education programs and facilitating the award of qualifications on the basis of prior learning, as well as encouraging higher education institutions to improve their capacity to recognize prior learning;

– To review national qualifications frameworks, with a view to ensuring that learning paths within the framework provide adequately for the recognition of prior learning;

– To form a research team on professional recognition from the number of the countries and organizations which are voluntarily expressed a desire to participate in it;

– To promote teaching staff mobility taking into account the guidelines from the Working group on mobility and internationalization;

– To make our higher education more socially inclusive by implementing the EHEA social dimension strategy;

– To ensure that qualifications from other EHEA countries are automatically recognized at the same level as relevant domestic qualifications;

– To enable our higher educational institutions to use a suitable EQAR registered agency for their external quality assurance process, respecting the national arrangements for the decision making on QA outcomes.

The focused attention within the European area is given to education recognition and improving of its quality as well.

The Revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European higher education area (ESG), which determined more flexible approaches in evaluating the education quality, approved by the Conference of ministers in Yerevan, was a logical outcome of advance preparation and discussions at various platforms. While the two main principles: the mobility and the learning throughout life are staying invariable.

A key goal of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. They have played and will continue to play an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and cross-border cooperation. Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programs and other provision.

The ESG are based on following four principles of quality assurance in EHEA:

– Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;

– Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programs and students;

– Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;

– Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

The principles for forming the national quality model should be the following:

– All quality assurance forms and procedures should be focused on the further improving of education quality;

– The diversity of the approaches in the assessment is welcomed, if the common for all principles of evaluation and quality assurance are applied;

– All participants of educational process, especially students, take part in quality assurance procedure;

– The quality assurance agencies are independent.

Moreover, the task of taking into account the main “tools of transparency”: EQF (European Qualification Framework), ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), LO (Learning Outcomes) in European Standards of Quality Assurance was set more significantly. If in the first edition of the Standards the tools of transparency was considered as independent activities within the framework of the Bologna process and was not taken into account so the next developing level task is not only in the integration of higher education national system into common educational area, but in the integration of the tools of integration as well.

The ten standards were suggested to use in the new ESG edition (it was seven in the previous one). The individual areas of assessment are:

– Student-centered learning and assessment;

– Student admission, progression, recognition and certification;

– Information management;

– On-going monitoring and periodic review of educational programs.

In general the following directions are highlighted as the strategic guidance on quality assurance:

– Work improvement in the area of internationalization, namely in favor of cooperation, increasing the number of foreign experts for the accreditation procedures, participation in international networks, development of international mobility of employees;

– The adaptation of all national educational systems to the Revised ESG: the new edition of the standards allows to be more responsive to changes in higher education, moreover, now the implementation of student-centered approach in teaching is a separate area of evaluation.

– Quality improvement of accreditation agencies activities: the new approach in assessment of agencies activities, aimed at assessing the dynamics of their development, will contribute to the improvement of the agencies works, and thus solving the main task – providing the highest quality of education in general.

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programs this is another document which is aimed to improve the quality of education was adopted in the Conference of ministers in Yerevan. “Joint programs” are understood as an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries, and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree. The present European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programs has been developed:

– To dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programs by setting standards for these programs that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria, and

– To facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programs that genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character.

The ESG apply to quality assurance procedures of joint programs as to all other types of programs. Thus, the European Approach is mainly based on the ESG and on the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). In addition, the European Approach takes into account the distinctive features of a joint program and, thus, specifies the “standard” approach accordingly.

The institutions that offer a joint program should be recognized as higher education institutions by the relevant authorities of their countries, i.e. they should have national license and accreditation. Their respective national legal frameworks should enable them to participate in the joint program and, if applicable, to award a joint degree.

All cooperating institutions should be involved into development and implementation of a joint program. And the main requirement for the joint program is that the terms and conditions of the joint program should be laid down in a cooperation agreement. The agreement should in particular cover the following issues:

- Denomination of the degree(s) awarded in the program;
- Coordination and responsibilities of the partners involved regarding management and financial organization (including funding, sharing of costs and income etc.);
- Admission and selection procedures for students;
- Mobility of students and teachers;
- Examination regulations, student assessment methods, recognition of credits and degree awarding procedures in the consortium.

The admission requirements and selection procedures should be appropriate in light of the program's level and discipline. Recognition of qualifications and of periods of studies (including recognition of prior learning) should be applied in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary documents.

The document also spelled out on the procedure for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programs in the EHEA, in particular that the cooperating institutions should jointly select a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency. The agency should communicate appropriately with the competent national authorities of the countries in which the cooperating higher education institutions are based. The external quality assurance procedure should be based on a self-evaluation report (SER) jointly submitted by the cooperating institutions. The SER should contain comprehensive information that demonstrates the compliance of the programme with the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA (part B).

In addition, the report should contain the necessary information about the respective national frameworks of the cooperating institutions that foreign agencies and experts might need in order to appreciate the context, especially the positioning of the program within the national higher education systems.

The SER should focus explicitly on the distinctive feature of the joint program as a joint endeavor of higher education institutions from more than one national higher education system.

Of course, the recommendations of this document will be considered, since the accreditation of joint programs in Russia is a question of the nearest future in the framework of the project "the Export of Russian education".

In 1999, the establishment of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was included by the Bologna Declaration in the list of goals to be achieved by countries participating in the Bologna process. ECTS has become a key tool of the European higher education area after reforms carried out in the Bologna process, and was accepted by the national credit system in most of EHEA countries.

ECTS helps to design, describe and implement programs allowing to integrate different learning types in the learning process throughout life and promotes

student mobility by facilitating recognition of qualifications and periods of study. The Revised ECTS User's Guide was also adopted on the Conference in Yerevan. The following achievements of Bologna process was included in the Revised Guide: EHEA creation, the consolidation of learning throughout life, the changes of higher education paradigm from teacher-oriented to student-centered, wider usage of learning outcomes and the development of new forms of learning and teaching. The Special attention is paid to the development and implementation of educational programs based on the experience of higher educational institutions by the usage of qualifications frameworks and the application of the ECTS principles in academic practice.

ECTS is extremely important at the modern stage, when the learning process is diversified and the massive online courses (MOOC) are widely distributed. The, distance learning programs of this courses can be read and recognized only when there is a unified system of classification, which ECTS is. ECTS is also important in filling the European diploma Supplement, which gives the concept of the national education system and facilitates the process of recognition of qualifications.

With the help of the Bologna reforms it has been made the progress in providing the possibility to the students and graduates for moving in the European higher education area where their qualifications and periods of study are recognized; the educational programs provide graduates with the knowledge, skills and competencies for further studies and for entering the European labor market; the educational organizations have become more active in international context; the representatives of the academic community participate in joint research and educational programs. European higher education area has entered into a dialogue with the other world regions and is considered as a model of structured cooperation.

However, the implementation of structural reforms is uneven, and the tools are used sometimes incorrectly, bureaucratic and superficial. Further improvement of higher education systems and more involved academic community participation in this process are necessary for realizing the full potential of European higher education area.

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УДК 331

Skorobogatova, V. I.

Strategic priorities for the recognition of foreign education and quality assurance in the European region / V. I. Skorobogatova, T. K. Rostovskaya // Известия высших учебных заведений. Поволжский регион. Общественные науки. – 2018. – № 2 (46). – С. 135–142. – DOI 10.21685/2072-3016-2018-2-16.