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RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING ON THE VERGE OF EHEA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL REPORTS 2009

Abstract

Content analysis on keywords qualification framework, recognition and quality assurance of Declarations and Communiqués that earmark the Bologna Process shows that the terms have been lately of an interest among high level decision makers.

Recognition of prior learning is one of the most innovative features of the qualification framework and was originally based on the need to provide access to learning for persons who had informal skills and knowledge that could never be recognized formally, unless they involved in formal education.

The overarching approach used within EU for policy coordination in area of education is the Open Coordination Method, regarded as “soft law” when compared to the Community Method.

The analysis of the most recent national reports on Bologna Process (2009) demonstrates the different implementation stages of the concept “recognition of prior learning”, as well as the diversity of the various countries participating in EHEA.

Keywords: content analysis , qualification framework, quality assurance, recognition of prior learning, Open Coordination Method

The author has conducted a content analysis (see Table 1) of Bologna Process’ Declarations and Communiqués (8 documents in total [8]) by using the keywords: Qualification Framework, Quality Assurance, Recognition, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Recognition is crucial in ensuring transfer to lifelong learning society. RPL is one of the most innovative features of the qualification framework. It “ is formal acknowledgement of previous learning, from informal as well as formal learning situation” (Harvey, 2004). The denomination “Recognition” includes the concept “recognition of prior learning”. Due to the topic of this paper, the denomination “Recognition of Prior Learning” has also been illustrated separately. The quality assurance as Bologna Process reform area is chosen to ensure the longevity of the mutual recognition: “Once achieved, recognition or confidence must be nurtured and maintained. Achieving and maintaining confidence and trust can be perceived as a perpetual process.” (Stenback, 1996:148).

An evolution of ideological complexity of terms has happened throughout years 1998-2010 and is especially noticeable in the case of term “recognition”. In Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 the term recognition is mentioned 4 times in total, twice it is spoken of international recognition, once – of mutual recognition and once – of external recognition. Just seven years later in Bergen a “specialization” of the term occurs – the ministers speak of recognition of accreditation, recognition of degrees and study periods, recognition of foreign qualifications,

recognition of prior learning and recognition of joint degrees. Two years later, in London Communique even more concepts appear: recognition tools and procedures, fair recognition, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, recognition of qualifications and recognition authorities, in ministerial conference in Leuven – full recognition.

Table 1. Dynamics of Appearance Frequency of Selected Keywords in Declarations and Communiqués of Bologna Process, 1998-2010

	Qualification Framework	Quality Assurance	Recognition	Recognition of Prior Learning
Sorbonne Declaration (1998)	0	0	4	0
Bologna Declaration (1999)	0	1	1	0
Prague Communiqué (2001)	1	4 (9)	4	0
Berlin Communiqué (2003)	5	8 (11)	6 (8)	1
Bergen Communiqué (2005)	10	8 (13)	11 (13)	2
London Communiqué (2007)	14	10 (16)	21 (23)	5
Leuven Communiqué (2009)	5	2 (7)	6	1
Budapest-Vienna Declaration (2010)	1	1 (2)	2	0

It is indeed apparent that all of the terms selected by the author have been lately of an interest among high level decision makers. The appearance frequency dynamics of the chosen keywords show a clear augmenting tendency from year 2001 till 2009.

Even though the content analysis might indicate “a drop of interest” in 2010 -the issues are still up-to-date. In 2010 -as part of the 2009-2012 work plan [8], the Bologna Follow-up Group set up working groups on both Qualifications Frameworks and Recognition, with Quality Assurance being one of the two continued actions from before.

There is willingness to promote and support Bologna process at a political level. However the Bologna process has been criticized for its rapidly evolving high level policy agendas set at two-year intervals that make a hard to follow pace for the lower units of policy implementers (Neave and Maassen, 2007:137).

The overarching approach used within the EU for coordination in education area, is the Open Method of Coordination [3]. Compared to the Community Method, which creates uniform rules that Member States must adopt, provides sanctions if they fail to do so, and involves court in case of disobedience, the Open Method of Coordination is regarded as “soft law” (Schaefer

2006; Trubek, Trubek 2005; Copeland, ter Haar 2010) and produces conflicting accounts of its effectiveness within the member states.

The Open Method of Coordination is based principally on three action promoters:

- jointly identifying and defining objectives to be achieved (in Bologna Process adopted by the e.g. Ministers of Education);
- jointly established measuring instruments (statistics, indicators, guidelines, in Bologna Process e.g. ESG, Stocktaking indicators);
- benchmarking, i.e. comparison of the Member States' performance and exchange of best practices (in Bologna Process monitored by e.g. BFUG).

The main critics of “soft law” approach concerns the enactment of the policy- a specific task is imposed on the national policy-makers, and deadlines are set at which point national governments are expected to produce reports that can be fed back into European level OMC processes (Gornitzka, 2006: 37), which allow for “an exercise in symbolic politics where national governments repackage existing policies to demonstrate their apparent compliance with EU objectives”(Zeitlin, 2005: 24), stage for appearance of “naked emperor” (Chalmers, Lodge 2003: 23). “OMC processes would represent... a podium where badges of honour and shame are awarded through the presentation of national performance data in league tables and scoreboards” (Gornitzka, 2005: 7).

The analysis of the most recent [8] national action reports on recognition (2009) demonstrates the different implementation stages of the concept "recognition of prior learning", as well as the diversity of the various countries participating in EHEA. Thus, for example, Albania has no RPL procedures in place whatsoever, Germany lacks nationally established procedures (Länder have model trials), UK/Scotland has an elaborated national procedure and comprehensively applies RPL in practice (whereas in Germany - in the 06/07 winter semester, people in occupations, and without formal HE entrance qualifications, accounted for only 1 % of all new students). Also Latvia is among countries where limited if any RPL activities are done - the current legislation does not foresee RPL.

Recommendations:

- Apart from stocktaking it would be useful to find out the reasons why there are countries that are lagging behind so much and address these issues directly;
- Strengthen the QAA Scotland/European RPL Network on recognition of prior learning;

- In debates with the government in Latvia to take Estonia as a good practice example and to stress the relevance of RPL to increased mobility on the labour market, as well as to the flexibility of the labour force;
- By preparing amendments to the Law on Higher Education Establishments legalize the recognition of prior learning in Latvia.

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