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The Bologna Process and Teacher Training in the Czech Republic: Opinions of Academic Staff and Students about the Two-cycle System Implementation at the Faculty of Education of Charles University in Prague

Abstract

One goal of the Bologna process is to restructure European university programs from monolithic five-year programs into two cycles, bachelor's and master's. In this paper, we ask academic staff (n=52) and students (n=126) at the Faculty of Education of Charles University in Prague about their opinions on the implementation of the two-cycle system at their faculty. Nine out of ten academic staff and three out of ten students prefer the old five-year programs, arguing that the two-cycle system is not suitable for teacher training, subject courses are not sufficiently linked with teaching courses and that bachelor's graduates cannot find jobs at schools. Students tend to prefer the two-cycle system, mostly because they get the bachelor's degree. Our results can be used as empirical evidence in discussion about possible changes of teacher training programs.

Keywords: Bologna process, two-cycle system implementation, bachelor's study, subsequent master's study, teacher training

Introduction

One of the goals of the Bologna process is the adoption of a university education system based on two main cycles, undergraduate (bachelor) and graduate (master),

typically 3 and 2 years long respectively. We refer to this Bologna goal and its current implementations as a *two-cycle system*, while the previous monolithic 5 year program leading to a master's degree is referred to as a *five-year (master's) program*. The experience from the implementation of such a system at Czech teacher training faculties should be analyzed before further transformation of teacher training is attempted.

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze reactions to the introduction of the two-cycle system in teacher training programs. Specifically, we conducted a survey on the opinions of academic staff and students about the two-cycle system implementation at the Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague.

Bologna Process – Basic Principles and Goals

The Bologna process is an agreement among European and some non-European countries (e.g., Armenia and Georgia) which aims to increase the accessibility, attractiveness and quality of higher education in Europe.

The main document of the Bologna process is the Bologna declaration (1999). It sees the following objectives as key ones for the European higher education: (1) adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, (2) adoption of a system based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, (3) establishment of a system of credits, such as in the ECTS system as a means of promoting student mobility, (4) promotion of students', teachers', researchers' and administrative staff's mobility, (5) promotion of European co-operation in the quality assurance of education and research at higher education institutions with regard to developing comparable criteria and methodologies, (6) promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education (for more details see, e.g., The Bologna declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation, 2010). Subsequent regular meetings of Ministers of Education (2001, 2003, 2005 and 2007) added other objectives, such as the promotion of lifelong learning, curricular reform, qualification framework, doctoral programs reform, social dimension, etc.

Two-cycle system Implementation

The Bologna process transforms European university programs to the two-cycle system, i.e. five – year master's programs have been or will be restructured into three-year bachelor's programs and two-year subsequent master's programs. In this section, we are discussing the literature related to the two-cycle system implementation in general and with a focus on Czech teacher training programs.

General Reactions to the Implementation

Kehm and Teichler (2006) discuss four controversies related to the two-cycle system implementation: (1) whether and to what extent the bachelor's cycle should be more practical and aimed at immediate employability of the graduates, (2) some three-year bachelor's programs may not be sufficient for highly qualified jobs, (3) the two-cycle system implementation is often considered as an attempt to shorten study time in general and decrease over-all qualification levels, (4) it attempts to "squeeze" the preceding five-year master's curriculum into a new three-year bachelor's curriculum in order to guarantee labor market relevance. This might lead to a reduction of student mobility. According to the authors, these controversies form a basis for objections to the two-cycle system.

The two-cycle system implementation has led to both positive (Sokol, 2011) and negative (Stehlík, 2011) reactions in the Czech Republic. The negative evaluations are mainly based on bad experience with the implementation at universities and its application even in programs where a Bachelor's degree makes no sense, since they are inherently academic (Egyptology) or bachelor's graduates cannot work in their area because of legislative restrictions (teacher training) (Stehlík, 2011). Sokol (2011) appreciates that bachelor's programs postpone adulthood and the choice of profession, whereas Stehlík (2011) is not happy with this effect. Still, Stehlík (2011) does not question the two-cycle system itself. He mainly complains that it was introduced uncritically and across-the-board. Other authors (Štech, 2011; Šťastná, 2011) point out that no impact analysis of the two-cycle study implementation has been conducted at Czech universities.

Reactions to the Implementation in Teacher Training Programs

Several countries changed the teacher training model from the concurrent model used in one-cycle studies to the consecutive model, although the latter one has several disadvantages compared to the preceding concurrent model (Flores, 2011; Kangro, 2004).

The Bologna process has an impact on teacher training in the Czech Republic as well. According to the Act on Pedagogical Staff (2004), teachers at basic schools and teachers of general and vocational subjects taught at secondary schools shall gain professional qualifications by completing an accredited master's study program. Before the two-cycle system implementation, teacher students followed five-year one-cycle master's programs. The main criticism of the two-cycle system implementation concerns the fact that faculties were forced to replace the concurrent model of teacher training by the consecutive model (Brebera, 2006; Marková and Urbánek, 2008; Vernerová, 2011).

There was a considerable effort made mainly by the Faculties of Education Deans Association in the Czech Republic to keep five-year master's study programs. It was, however, unsuccessful (except in primary school teacher training programs). The main reasons may be the weak position of the faculties of education among other faculties and the pressure of the Ministry of Education to implement two-cycle programs everywhere.

Nowadays, when implementation problems increasingly appear in Czech teacher programs, the Ministry of Education and the Accreditation Commission consider allowing five-year master's programs. However, faculties of education which would like to reintroduce the five-year master's programs are asked to deliver a detailed analysis and evidence supporting the idea that a five-year master's program is better. While such a request seems reasonable, no similar analysis and evidence supporting the two-cycle system implementation was given to the faculties of education before the implementation itself.

Therefore, going back to the five-year master's programs seems to be complicated. However, in September 2011 the Faculty of Education Deans Association in Slovakia and the Czech Republic declared that it supports the five-year one-cycle teacher training as an alternative of the current two-cycle system (Vyhlásenie Asociácie dekanov, 2011). The declaration mentions three main arguments: (1) a Bachelor's graduate of a teacher training program is not a qualified teacher according to the Act on Pedagogical Staff and can hardly find a job in the educational sector without legislative changes, (2) there is just little money for teaching assistants (a possible position for holders of a Bachelor's degree) in the Czech education sector, (3) too little space for practical teacher training at schools and international student exchange during the study.

Evaluation of Two-cycle System Implementation at the Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague

The two-cycle system was introduced at the Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague in the 2006/2007 academic year.

Even before the two-cycle system, the five-year master's program was divided into two *phases*. The first phase lasted six semesters and was finalized by comprehensive exams in the subjects which the student specialized in. Passing the comprehensive exam was necessary to enter the second phase. The second phase lasted four semesters and was finalized by comprehensive state exams, typically based on all subject courses of the whole five-year study, and by defending a thesis.

Despite the existence of the two phases, it was not possible to simply divide the five-year master's program into the two cycles. According to the Act on Pedagogical Staff (2004), teachers must complete an accredited master's study program. New bachelor's programs had to be designed so that they (1) made sense as a standalone program, without the subsequent master's program and (2) did not give teacher qualifications. Technically, bachelor's graduates could become so-called teaching assistants, but such positions are rarely opened at Czech schools.

The faculty restructured both phases: most courses in education, psychology and subject didactics were moved to the two-year subsequent master's study. Bachelor's study is focused on training in the subjects (such as mathematics, etc.) with no or weak connection with training in education, psychology and didactics.

The first two-cycle master's graduates left the faculty in 2011. In this year we conducted an empirical analysis of the opinions of the academic staff and students about the two-cycle implementation and its impact on teacher training programs.

Survey Sample

In total, 51 academic staff members from 16 out of 19 departments offering teacher training programs at the faculty and 1 member of the Institute of research and development of education (a research institute at the faculty which also gives lectures in the two-cycle study system) responded to our survey questionnaire. Two departments did not participate (Dept. of Psychology and Dept. of Special Education) and 1 department (Dept. of Primary Education) had not implemented the two-cycle study system and was not asked to participate in our survey. The departments with the number of participating staff members are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Departments at the faculty with corresponding number of academic staff members

Department	Partici- pants	Department	Partic- ipants
Czech Language	6	Department of Education	3
History & History Didactics	5	Art Education	3
Music Education	5	Russian & Language Teaching Meth- odology	2
Social Sciences & Philosophy	5	Physical Education	2
Biology & Environmental Studies	4	Czech Language	1
Mathematics & Mathematical Education	4	Chemistry & Chemistry Didactics	1

Department	Partici- pants	Department	Partic- ipants
English Language & Literature	3	IT & Technical Education	1
French Language & Literature	3	Institute of Research and Develop- ment of Education	1
German Studies	3	Total	52

Most of the academic staff members reported that they had been working at the faculty for more than ten years (67.3%, n=35). Most of them also worked on the two-cycle system accreditation (78.8%, n=41).

The other group of our respondents comprised students of the current two-cycle system. In total, 126 students participated in our survey, 30 bachelor's students and 96 master's students.

Survey Results

Was it a good idea?

The key question given to the academic staff was as follows:

Did you agree with the division of the study into a bachelor's and subsequent master's study?

The first two columns of Table 2 summarize the answers of the staff: 86.5% (n=45) disagreed and only 11.5% (n=6) agreed with the two-cycle system implementation in 2006. One person (1.9%) did not answer the question. The 6 staff members, who agreed with the transition, work at different departments and they have been members of the faculty for quite a long time (from 6 to 24 years).

Table 2. Academic staff members' choices between the two-cycle study and five-year master's study at the time of the transition and now

Do you prefer the two-cycle system?	At the time of introduction		Now	
	abs. freq.	rel. freq. (%)	abs. freq.	rel. freq. (%)
No	45	86.5	45	86.5
Yes	6	11.5	5	9.6
Not available	1	1.9	–	–
Neither of them	–	–	2	3.8
Total	52	100	52	100

The reasons for the prevalent negative answer are categorized into the following three groups:

- (1) The biggest group of these staff members (75.6%, $n=34$) argue that the two-cycle system is not “suitable for teacher training” and that training in educational science, psychology and subject didactics is not linked with subject training from the beginning of the study.
- (2) Seven staff members (15.6%) mention a general danger for the teaching profession, an intentional lowering of requirements for teacher qualifications and a danger for shortening teacher studies.
- (3) Three staff members (6.7%) mention other reasons. One member complains that there is no research-supported reason for the introduction of the two-cycle system. One staff member is afraid that the value of the university diploma will decrease. One staff member mentions higher administration load and less time for preparation for giving courses.

The reasons given by the six staff members who agreed with the implementation are that students get an academic degree already after three years and not after five years ($n=1$), students have the possibility to change their field or not to continue their study after finishing their bachelor’s study ($n=1$), higher student mobility ($n=1$) and that our higher school system is now synchronized with other countries ($n=1$). Two staff members did not give their reasons for agreement.

Should we go back to the old system?

The above question discussed the introduction of the two-cycle system in 2006. Another question for the staff members aimed at the possibility of reversing the current state of affairs:

If you could make a decision at this point, whether to keep the structured study (three-year bachelor’s and subsequent two-year master’s study) or re-accredit the five-years master’s study in your discipline, which type of study would you prefer?

The last two columns of Table 2 summarize their answers: 86.5% ($n=45$) prefer the old five-year master’s study and only 9.6% ($n=5$) would prefer to keep the two-cycle study. Two staff members did not make a choice. Evidently, the wish to reestablish the old system is very much driven by the staff’s general opinion on the two-cycle system, even though we did emphasize the need for ‘painful’ re-accreditation and most of the respondents were people who are active in the accreditation process and would probably have to bear the extra administrative load.

Only three out of the six staff members who agreed with the introduction of the two-cycle study would like to keep it. Two out of the six would prefer to go back to the five-year master and one recommends conducting a detailed analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the systems. Only two out of forty-five staff members who disagreed with the two-cycle implementation would prefer to keep it.

Student opinions

It is important to compare the academic staff members' opinions with the students' opinions. We asked the students a question similar to the second one asked to the staff:

If you could choose between the structured study (three-year bachelor's and subsequent two-year master's study) and a five-year master's study (not split into two phases), which type of study would you prefer?

Table 3 summarizes their answers.

Table 3. Students' choices between the two-cycle study and five-year master's study

Do you prefer the two-cycle system?	abs. freq.	rel. freq. (%)
No	38	30.2
Yes	85	67.5
Not available	3	2.4
Total	126	100

Source: Bendl and Voňková (2011) – adjusted.

Most of the students (67.5%, n=85) would keep the two-cycle system. The five-year master's system would be preferred only by 30.2% (n=38) of the students. Three did not give any answer.

The main reasons for the prevalent choice of the two-cycle system are getting a Bachelor's degree after three years of study (68.2%, n=58), the possibility of changing the field or the school after getting the Bachelor's degree (21.2%, n=18) and the possibility to stop studying after a Bachelor's degree if there were a reason to do that (5.9%, n=5).

The students who would prefer the five-year master's study gave mainly the following reasons: *compactness* of study, more time for both subject courses and

teaching practice (34.2%, n=13), more obligations in the two-cycle system such as one more admission procedure and writing a bachelor's thesis (34.2%, n=13) and a Bachelor's degree is not sufficient for those who want to teach in the future (13.2%, n=5). For more details on the students' choices, see Bendl and Vonkova (2011).

Discussion and Conclusion

Academic staff and students at Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague have different preferences: whereas about 90% of the interviewed academic staff favors the five-year master's programs, about 70% of the interviewed students prefer the two-cycle system. Still, the students who prefer the five-year master's report similar reasons as the staff. These are mainly that the two-cycle system is not suitable for teacher training, subject courses are not sufficiently linked to teaching courses (like education, psychology and didactics) and the fact that bachelor's graduates have difficulties finding a job at schools. In addition to the common reasons, students also complain that they must work harder in the current two-cycle system: there is a final comprehensive state exam and a thesis defense at the end of both cycles and an admission exam to both bachelor's and master's studies.

The prevalent reason of the student majority that prefers the two-cycle system is that they get a Bachelor's degree. On the other hand, the possibility of finishing their studies after the Bachelor's degree is mentioned just by five of those students. This suggests that the division into two cycles is perceived as more or less formal.

Our results can contribute to possible subsequent changes in teacher training programs. There have already been two attempts to re-accredit a five-year master's program, namely at the Faculty of Education of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice in 2007 and the Faculty of Education at the University of Hradec Králové in 2011. In both cases the Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic rejected their proposals. However, it is interesting to compare the explanations of the two rejections. (Note that the Commission itself is a part of the Ministry of Education, but has a certain degree of independence; cf. Memorandum (2010) and The Statute of the Accreditation Commission (2004)).

In the first case in 2007, the Commission saw the proposed five-year master's program as an anti-systemic solution of teacher training in the Czech Republic. The Faculty intended to accredit the five-year system parallel to the two-cycle system and then compare and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of both systems. In the second case in 2011, the Commission's arguments for the rejection

seemed to be milder. The Commission said that the proposed five-year master's is not qualitatively different from the existing two-cycle system and recommended conducting a project which would evaluate the impact of the two-cycle system on the teacher training. According to the Commission, it should also be considered whether to enable an accreditation of five-year master's program parallel to the two-cycle system. In the light of the rejection to run both systems together at the University of South Bohemia, a recommendation to evaluate and compare the two systems at the University of Hradec Králové seems to be an interesting development.

According to some academic staff, the two-cycle system is a threat to the whole teacher training system, since it opens a debate about a possibility for teachers with a Bachelor's degree only, which is impossible under the current legislation (e.g., Stehlík, 2011, p. 20). In public discussion and formal statements (e.g., a statement of the head of the Student Chamber of the Council of Higher Education Institutions, statements of some political parties), it has indeed been repeatedly mentioned that a three-(or four) year study is sufficient for teachers at the second stage of basic school (lower secondary education level) and that it is necessary to change the law accordingly. On the other hand, opinions of academic staff responsible for teacher training programs are quite different. They are based on a current concept of the teacher as an expert, implying longer training.

Several questions are left for future research. It would be interesting to find out how well-prepared bachelor's and master's graduates feel for teaching and how headmasters feel about the appropriate length of teacher training.

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