

Joint programs as a tool of building european higher education area

Programas conjuntos como herramienta de construcción del espacio europeo de educación superior

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ABSTRACT:

The article describes the practice of joint double degree programs in partnership with leading universities of the European Union and presents the elaborated recommendations to the Russian higher education institutions on joint programs' preparation and implementation with the European higher education institutions within the framework of European Higher Education Area. Authors make an attempt to analyze the potential competitive advantages of universities received during the development of such cooperation. As an example, the article contains the analysis of the Lobachevsky University of Nizhni Novgorod practice of implementation of the joint program which resulted in the graduates receive two diplomas.

Keywords: joint programs, internationalization, European Higher Education Area, interinstitutional collaboration, Bologna process, student and staff mobility, double degree, innovations in education.

RESUMEN:

El artículo describe la práctica de programas mixtos de doble titulación en asociación con universidades líderes de la Unión Europea y presenta las recomendaciones elaboradas a las instituciones de educación superior de Rusia sobre la preparación y ejecución de programas conjuntos con las instituciones europeas de educación superior en el marco de la Educación Superior Europea Zona. Los autores intentan analizar las ventajas competitivas potenciales de las universidades recibidas durante el desarrollo de dicha cooperación. Como ejemplo, el artículo contiene el análisis de la Universidad Lobachevsky de Nizhni Novgorod práctica de la aplicación del programa conjunto que dio lugar a los graduados reciben dos diplomas.

Palabras clave: programas conjuntos, internacionalización, Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior, colaboración interinstitucional, proceso de Bolonia, movilidad de estudiantes y personal, doble titulación, innovaciones en educación.

1. Introduction

Today's stage of the societal development is characterized by the growing role of education which becomes one of the most important mechanisms that support national compatibility and leading position in the world, and guarantee national safety. It proceeds from a new social model based on knowledge and its use, innovations, high technologies. In fact, knowledge (and education) become the main factor of economic growth. One of the main objectives of higher education is the goal of helping its region in acceleration of economic development in the fight against poverty and social inequality. [Avralev & Efimova, 2013] Nowadays, a successful country is a country with a competitive economy which fully depends on competitive human resources and which can provide a competitive national education system. In terms of evidencing understanding of this statement, countries all over the world aim at transnational education system integration.

Today, throughout the world there is a tendency to move from bilateral cooperation of individual universities within specific educational or research programs to multilateral interaction university consortium on a wide range of issues. [Efimova, 2013]

It is ever increasing demand for transparent and objective assessment tools of quality of education and for this purpose there are various accreditation centers and agencies. However, the accreditation procedure cannot solve all the problems related to the choice of institution and specialty, with the placement of the state order for training of specialists, with the opening/closing of certain educational programs in high school, etc. [Avralev & Efimova, 2015]

The turning point in bringing this intention to the reality was the beginning of the Bologna process in Europe. The process began in the mid-70s when the EU (European Union) Council adopted a Resolution on the first cooperation program in the field of education. In 1998, education ministers participating in the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the University of Paris, Sorbonne, signed the Sorbonne Joint Declaration. The decision to engage in a voluntary process to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was formalized one year later in Bologna, by 29 countries (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). The process today includes dozens of participating countries that have ratified the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe (1954). Russia signed the Bologna declaration at the Ministerial Conference in 2003. Since then, Russia has been fully participating in creation of the European Higher Education Area. Among different aspects of the creation process we can outline development of a sustainable quality assurance system, organization of degree structure based on two cycles (undergraduate and graduate) as well as improvement of recognition of degrees and periods of study [Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2003]. The main participants of the process should be the higher education institutions. Their initiative, effective work and cooperation intend to ensure rapprochement, harmonization and order of the European higher education systems.

2. Materials and methods

The main provisions of the Bologna declaration (and the Bologna process) are:

- to adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- to adopt a system with two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate);
- to use a system of credits;
- to promote student and academic staff mobility;
- to create basis for cooperation in quality assurance, to create competitive environment;

After signing the Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003) Communiqué there were added some more provisions:

- to include a lifelong learning strategy that allows to get from one level of education to another;
- to involve in the education process higher education institutions (HEIs) and students as its essential participants;
- to promote the attractiveness of the European higher education;
- to confluence education and science areas;

- to create national framework regulating the process of passing to another education level.

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is the common European education space of all Bologna process participants in the sphere of higher education. It was launched in March 2010, during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference. EHEA is a kind of system reflecting the main aims and goals of the Bologna process; they are rapprochement, harmonization and order of the European higher education systems. Between 1999 – 2010 all the efforts of the Bologna process members were targeted to create the European Higher Education Area that became reality with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March, 2010, and coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Bologna process.

It should be noticed that from the practical point of view, development of international education programs (joint programs) is the most effective way to create the European Higher Education Area, the most important tool to implement the Bologna process provisions. The joint programs seek to promote the European education competitiveness (in this context the European education includes the Russian education as well) and its quality assurance. The main features of a joint program are: the partners agree on all its elements (curricula, teaching methodology, quality assurance system including the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), rules and principles of evaluation, requirements for program content, academic staff and student selection); mobility with study periods abroad (in partner institutions), which are recognized and transferred automatically, is included; joint program management; all partner institutions recognize the awarded diplomas/degrees. Learning outcomes form the basis for education comparability. **[Developing Joint Masters Programmes for Europe** (March 2002 – January 2004), Results of the EUA Joint Masters Project, European University Association]

The advantages of the international joint degrees are as follows:

- multicultural environment of studying;
- training for professions in demand;
- academic mobility to the partner institutions abroad;
- international knowledge;
- innovative teaching methodology and technologies;
- pan-European diploma supplement and certificate with a foreign institution qualification.

Joint Degree programs development in Russia arises from:

- EHEA development;
 - European HEIs enter to the Russian education market;
 - need to modernize the existing education programs, to bring them in conformity with the market economy and labour market requirements (using the best practices);
 - need for extra fund and human resources in order to improve the development and implementation of new education programs.
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3. Results

According to the results of the analysis of the implemented programs, an effective tool to renovate the existing education programs and to have their international recognition is to adapt Russian HEIs curricula to the European institutions standards. This tool also gives more opportunities to prepare students using the new programs based on the interdisciplinary approach. In fact, joint programs encourage competitive growth of Russian HEIs at the education market. The adopted Russian and European HEIs curricula are essential aspects of awarding a joint degree, recognized at the European labour market. Such degrees are one of the goals of EHEA development. Joint degree award also indicates that the most integrated joint international education programs are working.

The first joint Russia-Europe education programs were launched in the 90s of the XX century. Since then a big experience in international inter-institution cooperation has been gained, but still the total amount of joint education programs is not as big as we would like. According to

the 2013 research made by a group of European experts, Russian universities stated about the implementation of 317 joint education programs. However, the European institutions confirmed the implementation of only 117 of them [Burquel, Shenderova, Tvorogova, 2014].

A small number of joint programs in Russia can be explained by challenges arising in the process of their implementation. The challenges analysis may help to formulate several recommendations and suggestions on the joint degrees development and implementation in the Russian higher education system.

It should be always kept in mind that joint programs support Russian education, promote it and act as an important tool in implementing Bologna Declaration provisions in Russia. However, there is no general scheme of joint programs organization. Each program is unique, it has its own features and special aspects that should be taken into consideration and implemented in the regulating documents (legal, institutional).

Presently in the majority of European countries, including Russia, joint programs activities are regulated not by national legislation, but by institutional one as well as by interuniversity agreements. In addition, HEIs may use interstate agreements in the sphere of education and culture while developing and implementing joint programs. This situation has both beneficial and negative aspects.

Beneficial aspect: universities have free scope to develop and implement joint programs.

Negative aspect: in the framework of a united state, there is no united centralized development and implementation mechanism as well as there is no joint programs quality evaluation criteria.

Almost all European countries award joint program diploma in accordance with the requirements applied to the national education programs [Touch & Rauhvargers, 2002]. A similar situation exists in Russia.

Besides, until recently many countries had legislative limitations on the language of teaching (usually the only possible language was the national one) that hindered joint programs implementation with other countries [Touch & Rauhvargers, 2002]. Now the situation is changing, and almost every country legislated the possibility to teach in foreign languages that is very important to attract foreign students. Russia is among these countries. Thus, Federal Act "On Education in the Russian Federation" (par. 5,6, Art. 14) [Federal Act of 29.12.2012 #273-FL "On education in the Russian Federation"] has a provision legislating the possibility to be educated in foreign language in accordance with the educational program. Language or languages of the program are regulated by the local legislation of the educational institution implementing the educational programs [Federal Act of 29.12.2012 #273-FL "On education in the Russian Federation"].

One of the significant limitations on joint programs implementation is imposed by the existing national legislation regulating diploma format, as it prevents from possibility to add any information about joint program or name of partner institutions.

National legislation acts and HEIs practice data analysis permit the following conclusions:

- Since the early 90s Russian universities got the possibility to establish contacts, develop cooperation and work with foreign partner institutions on the organization of international programs. Nevertheless, until present days the legislation has no clear and common definition of international (as well as joint) educational programs. Moreover, the situation is complicated by absence of an official centralized database of the existing joint interuniversity educational programs [Federal Education and Science Supervision Service Decree of 30.09.2005 #1938 "On Ratification of Performance Rates and State Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions Criteria" (with amendments of 25.04.2008) // Education Accreditation. Appendix. 2005. #2(2)].
- Russian higher education legislation does not have any regulations of awarding a joint degree diploma upon successful completion of joint program. As a result, upon successful completion of joint program there is double degree awarded at all levels of joint program study.
- In Russia, the process of international education programs accreditation is the same as that of national education programs. However, in that case specific aspects and innovative character of the

programs, developed during the international cooperation with partner institutions, are not taken into consideration.

- At present, effectiveness of the HEI internal quality assurance system, promoting the national education system transparency, is evaluated not only during the international accreditation but also during the national accreditation in Russia [the RF Government Decree of 18.11.2013 #1039 (revised 26.12.2014) "On State Accreditation of Educational Activities"].
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4. Discussion

On the practical side, Russian HEIs joint programs implementation analysis permit the following conclusions:

1. The best way to develop and implement innovative education programs is an interuniversity cooperation with foreign HEIs within the framework of Joint Programs. Such cooperation allows using the best practices of foreign universities and ensuring demand for the programs at the education services market.
2. The programs, developed in cooperation with foreign HEIs, give Russian students additional opportunities of employability and successful building of their career.
3. Preferably, joint programs should be interdisciplinary and should be carried out in cooperation with professional associations and employers, including foreign. Thus, the program's implementation may have broad competence-based outcomes.
4. It is very important to get systematic support of joint programs development and implementation from state institutions. The HEIs initiative should not only be restricted by proper framework, but the government should also support it.
5. An effective mechanism to attract foreign students to study in Russian HEIs in the framework of joint programs must be developed and implemented.

According to the analysis of the practice of international joint programs implementation, there are several events and stages, bearing a lot of difficulties and challenges; overcoming them is necessary for successful program implementation. These stages are as follows:

- development of compatible quality assurance systems;
- development of an effective mechanism of mutual recognition of study periods in foreign partner institutions;
- mechanisms, promoting different countries' education systems transparency. They are such mechanisms as ECTS, European Diploma Supplement etc.;
- student and staff mobility;
- curricula comparability in order to develop an effective curriculum during a study period abroad. The disciplines under study should not be repeated in partner institutions; the assessment system should be comparable;
- engagement of external experts to evaluate quality of education in the framework of international (and joint) programs in order to provide effectiveness of organizing both study and assessment processes.

The following recommendations were made by the analysis of the international practice and the implementation of educational programs:

- Support from the Russian state institutions should be directed, first of all, to develop own higher education system, to increase the system's competitiveness by developing and implementing joint educational programs with European HEIs and by attracting foreign students within such programs.
- In the context of globalization and integration boost on the international stage in all spheres of social life, Russian higher education system must be developed in terms of its comparability (with regard to the applied mechanisms, criteria and standards) with European higher education systems. Such comparability will create favourable basis for developing joint education programs. Their beneficial aspect is the enrichment of the existing education programs with innovative elements of foreign education programs.
- By developing joint education programs Russia will have an opportunity to enter foreign education

- markets (including those of CIS) and to promote Russian higher education abroad.
- It is likely that joint programs implementation on the one hand will increase Russian graduates outflow abroad. On the other hand, on the successful joint program completion abroad students are awarded at least two diplomas (including the Russian one) and have an opportunity to use these documents in Russia. Thus, the outflow (brain drain) may be reduced by joint programs promotion.
- The analysis of different types of governmental support for joint programs showed that there is greater need for high efficiency support in terms of bilateral interstate agreements, not for support within a particular country and its education authority.
- Practice of International joint programs development and implementation showed that most costs relate to the preparation stage and the development stage, as well as coordination of curricula of partner institutions, applying different education systems. So, once the experience has been accumulated, it should be promoted among other HEIs, interested in joint programs development as it may help to avoid extra costs in similar situations. This policy is popular among international organizations and funds making financial contributions to joint programs development. Thus, for example, within the European Commission Erasmus+ program there are projects oriented on HEIs best practices promotion (including joint programs development practice).
- In order to promote joint programs and attract foreign students to these programs, a standardized students enrolment procedure must be developed. The existing inconsistent information about the enrolment procedure and joint programs study may prevent these programs from attracting foreign students and have negative impact on programs' funding.
- It is important to form and constantly renovate a common database of the joint programs implemented by the Russian HEIs. If this database is available at the resources of higher education authorities or education funds, the given information will be more trustworthy for a potential user.

One of the examples of joint programs is the Russian-French bachelor's program "Economics and Management" implemented by the Lobachevsky University of Nizhni Novgorod (UNN) and the Université Grenoble Alpes (UGA). This program was implemented gradually.

The first stage of development:

- the partners analyzed their Economics program curricula, elicited different and similar aspects;
- UNN studied the partner's experience in implementing such programs by organizing, among other things, conferences and workshops with colleagues from partner institutions.

The second stage was dedicated to preparations for program's implementation:

- UNN staff training on modern pedagogical methods;
 - UNN Economics program curriculum correction in accordance with French partners' recommendations;
 - it were determined learning modules taught by French partners and the assessment procedure;
 - preparation of administrative staff for promoting the program at the educational market;
 - it was determined students selection criteria for the program.
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5. Conclusion

As a result of the collaborative work the partners agreed on the following program implementation scheme. During one academic year by distance learning Russian students master three courses of French bachelor's program in French or in English: "Money and Finance", "International Economics", "Industrial Economics". Other courses of the UGA bachelor's program curriculum are transferred from the UNN curriculum. Students get all materials in electronic form in French or in English and get full access to the UGA web site. With the use of distance technologies, UNN organizes lectures and consultations on the mentioned disciplines carried out by French professors. Final exams are held in UNN by the rules and under control of UGA. Main study program is carried out in accordance with general UNN rules.

Student mobility is a complicated and expensive component of joint program, european experts say [Tvorogova, Burquel, Shenderova, 2014]. Usually high cost of student mobility may lead to joint program's closure. However, in the framework of the applied UNN-UGA program the problem was solved due to distance learning usage. The students are not obliged to go to France in order to complete the program. Still the students have an opportunity to go to UGA to

study for a short period (several weeks – 5 months).

On successful completion and passing all the exams, the students are awarded two diplomas: Russian bachelor's degree and French national diploma "Licence" (corresponding to bachelor's degree). This is, apparently, the program's advantage: possibility to get simultaneously two national diplomas (French and Russian) via mutual transfer of courses from UNN and UGA curricula. In the academic year 2014-2015 in UNN there are 11 students enrolled in this program.

The studied example shows both solved problems and advantages of joint programs implementation. As it was stated before, every program is unique. So, other programs' best practices analysis and their generalization may and should become a good tool for improving ways to support joint programs initiation and implementation in Russia.

Nowadays the main principle of global pedagogical process development is the principle of openness of scientific knowledge system. Thus, we can see education systems convergence both on the concept and technology levels. Global pedagogical process develops in the context of its synchronic growth (due to ordering international relations) and dynamic growth (due to cultural diversity of civilizations). In this complicated and controversial process, it is very important to be careful with national cultural differences of countries, to be able to see national culture evolution contrasted with the world one; and at the same time to use effectively the advantages of integration processes.

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