

Short country survey on employability among BFUG members

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The introductory background

The higher education system that had been operated before the introduction of the Bologna process in the Czech Republic was a typical central European educational structure based on long (compact) five-year programmes of study (in the majority of cases lasting 10 semesters). In some cases (some engineering disciplines, pharmacy, and all programmes connected with medicine) the length of study was 11 or even 12 semesters). The Bachelor degrees were not available at the Czech higher education institutions. The PhD studies were separated from the previous educational steps. All Czech higher education institutions were of the university type. Colleges or non-university types of HEIs were not available. The private HEIs were not available as well.

The implementation of Bologna principles (mainly the three cycles: Ba-Ma-PhD) lead to the exceptions for the following branches: medical faculties, pedagogical faculties received the exception to perform only long Ma programmes without the Ba studies. Classical Universities switched relatively quickly to the three cycle system. The ministry of education forced universities not to introduce too (parallelly operated) streams of Ba-programmes of study: (i) as the end step of the tertiary education and (ii) the first (preparatory, proceeding) step for the following Ma-programmes.

Czech Republic started from the very beginning of the Bologna process with its implementation based on previous discussions and analyses. The principles of the Bologna Process are involved in the 1998 (Czech) Act on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which came into force on 1 July 1998. The amendment to this act came into operation on 1 July 2001.

The primary acceptance of the Bologna principles was clearly expressed by the state institutions (Ministry of Education), whereas HEIs (both their administrators and teaching staff) and especially certain faculties of universities, and Technical universities as well, reacted negatively, showing the reasons of this negative reaction (difficult separability of the studies, disadvantages of the first two steps division etc.) The frequent argumentation of these HEIs was fear on loses in quality in the Czech higher education, being traditionally very high.

1) What are the main challenges for your country in terms of employability? (eg Is graduate unemployment a problem? Are there restrictions on access to certain jobs? Is there a careers and guidance service?)

The graduate unemployment certainly is not a crucial problem in the Czech republic. Nevertheless, there are some phenomena connected with both the employability and unemployment. In the past 7 years the unemployment of graduates was in the range 2-3%, whereas the total unemployment in the country was in the range 7-10%. The unemployment of graduates has shown a continuous decline within the last 6 years. The complex index of advantages originating from getting a tertiary degree (including three items: 1. threat of unemployment, 2. quality of the jobs, 3. the level of salaries) reaches in the Czech republic very high values (higher than 70 %, as compared to the whole employed population). The percentage of advantages originating from the received tertiary level degrees increases in the series: bachelors from colleges - bachelors from universities – masters – PhDs. The most abrupt changes occurred in the lower part of the given series. Some phenomena connected with both the employability are as follows. The main problem is an extremely high interest of Ba-graduates to continue their studies in Ma-programmes. There are probably two reasons causing this situation: (i) traditional thinking of students and their families, (ii) traditional thinking of employers. The main challenge of the Czech republic in the terms of employability

certainly is the acceptability of bachelors in practice. Some surviving feelings that a bachelor cannot be “a proper tertiary education graduate” (because of the short period of time of the studies) are still very strong in many sectors of the practice. This drawback has been ameliorating in the very few past years, but it is still a crucial problem. As already mentioned, this is, however, very much branch-dependent. Paradoxically, but as the logical consequence, bachelors are trying to continue immediatally their studies often to incredible high percentage (reaching often 100%) The employability issue is more or less dependent on the branch of graduates: On one side, companies clearly demonstrate and supportet by their personal data that there is a lack of IT specialists, engineers, dentists, and graduates of some other branches. It is interesting that the unemployment is higher in the same arenas, whereas economic, business and administration branches show much better employability of their graduates. Another interesting result of statistics is lower unemployment among graduates from private HEIs then from the public ones. Explanations of these findings are very versatile: (i) bachelors of private HEI often continue their studies at public HEI, (ii) in the sector of private HEIs, engineering branches are not so abundantly present, (iii) the percentage of students, having a job even during their studies, is higher at private HEI.

Restrictions for bachelors on access to a job are in the following branches: medical doctors, teachers at all levels (including both primary and secondary schools), pharmaceutical practice and some other. It is noteworthy that the situation in the education of teachers is specific for the Czech republic (Bologna process has not been accepted by the pedagogical faculties at universities and an exception to them has been coined in Czech act on higher education). It is interesting that here (in the education of teachers) the very good Czech tradition of the so-called “Teachers institutions” (a secondary educational institution preparing primary schools teachers) from the period between the two world wars was not continued in this sector – all teachers in the Czech republic should pass a long Ma-programme.

Careers and guidance service are offered in many various ways. HEIs organize contacts of students with potential employers. Students (for instance in the framework of IAESTE or other student organizations) organize fairs on employability opportunities. On the other hand there are projects supported by the Czech Ministry of education showing each year the situation in the employability/unemployment arena in the Czech republic for graduates of all kinds. An integral part of these analyses is the comparison of the situation in the Czech republic and foreign countries. There is another new attempt of the Ministry to force universities to make their programs of study even more transparent in connection to careers on their webb sites.

- 2) What would help you most as an output from this working group? Is there a dialogue in your country between higher education institutions and employers? If so, at what level does this take place – national, regional, institutional etc? What sort of issues does it cover?

I see the most important output of this working group in harmonizing of our ideas and consequences taken from our experience all over the Bologna arena. Moreover, we should persuade the Ministeries, HEIs and journalists all over the Europe that employability of graduates is one of the most important parameter in the assessment of the quality of HEIs.

The contacts between the employers and HEIs are very rich in the Czech republic (see the first example of good practice below). However, the results of the dialogue between these two parties are not always productive. Approaches of employers vary in a broad spectrum: from those who want to include in the curricula only generic and

transferable skills to those who underline too much the concrete skills for their specific jobs.

The contacts are organized on national level (Ministry of Education is the coach here), regional level (regional politicians - HEIs) and probably the most frequent are contacts on the institutional level (companies, employers-HEIs). Passing down in this series of levels the quality assurance issue diminishes its role, whereas the curricula content arrangement increases its role in the same direction.

3) Can you provide two examples of good practice in your country in relation to any of the themes to be covered by the report?¹

Example 1:

This example is the demonstration of the active participation of employers in devising curricula for new professionally oriented bachelor programmes of study: a big Czech chemical and refinery company has been fighting with the lack of their employees in their production facilities, because of aging of their staff. The most crucial was the situation at the positions of plant-operators. Here, the majority of employees of the company were, traditionally, former masters (Dipl.-Eng.). The company analysed the problem and decided to replace the retired masters by young bachelors. This was in full agreement with the results of the analysis, viz. that qualification demands on graduates in the position of plant-operators had been decreasing in parallel to the introduction of new sophisticated technologies (What a paradox, but truth !). The company participated very actively in the preparation of new bachelor programmes of study. The prompt accreditation of these new programmes enabled the enrolment of students within one year time after the first negotiations between the company and the HEI had been started. The story is now at its successful end (the first bachelors are employed in the company and old masters enjoying their deserved pension

Example 2:

This example comes from the arena of provision of careers and guidance services. The statistical data on employability of graduates of individual HEIs are regularly published and accompanied by their interpretation provided by a group of professionals. This gives the potential students good information supporting their study-planning. The other benefit is on the side of HEIs, because this approach is a good information feed-back to them. In spite of some arguing about the interpretations of the statistical data, this information resource is profitable to all parties, including the Ministry of education.