



Promoting Competency-based Education in Belarusian Higher Education

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Abstract. The Bologna process in Belarus has brought new challenges to Higher Education (HE) institutions in the country. HE sector in Belarus has been undergoing the transformational process from the traditional to new modes of learning. This article presents the survey data of Erasmus + KA2 programme project “Fostering Competencies Development in Belarusian Higher Education – FOSTERC” on the issue of learning modes in Belarusian HE and student learning outcomes. It also discusses the possibilities of encouraging competency-based education in Belarus by fostering mobility of HE teachers and HE students and HE graduates internships.

Keywords: *HE, modes of teaching & learning, labour market, diversity and interculturality, mobility, internships, lifelong learning, Belarus.*

Introductions

In 1999 the Ministers of Education from 29 European countries agreed on important joint objectives for the development of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The follow-up meetings on the Bologna process in Berlin (2003) stressed the role of students as full partners in HE governance, as well as emphasised the importance of learning outcomes in HE. Bergen (2005) recommended flexible learning paths including the recognition of prior learning and promotion of student mobility. London (2007) recognised the importance of intercultural understanding and respect. The Bologna Declaration (1999) and its follow-up communiqués are political documents or recommendations and do not regulate universities. However, they provide higher education institutions with tools and working methods to improve and develop HE.

Belarus joined EHEA in 2015 based on an agreed roadmap. Since then Belarus has been working on a “Strategic action plan implementation of the major objectives of the education system development in line with the EHEA principles and tools”. The major goals and objectives for structural reforms in HE that are outlined in the Belarus roadmap are as follows: to develop the National Qualification Framework, to establish quality assurance system and ensure recognition of qualifications, to introduce transparency tools, to promote mobility of HE staff and students, to enhance internationalization of studies, to ensure lifelong learning and social dimension in HE and fundamental EHEA values. Special focus is put on learning outcomes, curriculum design and delivery as well as assessment and opportunities to implement academic mobility programmes. This process is based on the outcomes of the Erasmus+ KA2 programme project “Fostering Competencies Development in Belarusian Higher Education (FOSTERC)”.

Competency-based education in EHEA

Why do educational policies discuss the importance of competency-based education in HE?

Learning and teaching is traditionally organized as acquisition of knowledge. The learning process needs a teacher. It happens inside a classroom and is de-contextualized. The learner is expected to memorize and to reproduce what has been written or said by the teacher or a researcher. Moreover, the learning process has a beginning and an end. Learning and teaching in the competency-based approach are organized as development of knowledge, skills and attitudes in a certain professional context, where individuals and group of learners are expected to co-create knowledge, to apply it and to develop an interest for continuous, lifelong learning. In an active, learner-centred approach knowledge is formed in the interaction between the students and the interaction between the teachers and students. The research into learning indicates (Lizzio A., Wilson K., Simons R. (2002)) that students who not only learn on the surface but also achieve deeper learning, including an ability to see links, adopt a critical approach, etc., also achieve better study results and a student becomes a co-creator of the learning process. The term “learning” also emphasises a process through which the understanding of the matter being studied is enhanced and thereby changed. In the learner-centred approach the term “self-directed learning” also leads to expectations for students to assume their own responsibility for becoming involved and assuming an active role in the learning process, with the help and support of teachers and other students. A precondition for active learning and teaching is mutual respect within teacher- student and student-student relationships.

Educational policies speak for student-centred learning and higher education that should be more relevant to working life (Wright, 2011). Youth need more jobs and well-paid jobs. HE students need to create jobs for themselves and others. They also should be owners of their own learning process and HE teachers should facilitate this learning.

So, how do the universities in EHEA conduct “working life relevant” studies? HE teachers are teaching HE students to be competent. Learning attitudes and picking up positive behavioural patterns require intrinsic motivation (“*I want*”) and self-efficacy (“*I can*”). HE teacher cannot learn on behalf of students or rely on trust students will learn as a result of just passing knowledge to them. Attitudes and behavioural patterns are developed by the learners themselves, based on their own learning history and through situated learning (e.g. a business context).

The purpose of this article is to identify educational modes used in Belarusian HE at the moment Belarus joined EHEA, as well as to gain an insight on the possibilities of intercultural mobility and lifelong learning in Belarusian HE.

Methodology

This paper is grounded on a major representative survey of FOSTERC, which compares the opinion of HE graduates and HE teachers from eight public universities in Belarus. The questionnaire of HE graduates used in this study was based on the survey design of the international research project entitled “The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society: New Demands on Higher Education in Europe” (REFLEX). In this project, a survey was conducted to examine the experience of HE graduates during their studies, their transition into the labour market and the acquisition of competencies during their academic studies (Allen and Van der Velden, 2011). The surveys of Belarusian HE teachers and HE graduates were carried out during the academic year of 2017/2018 and the questionnaires were answered online. HE graduates and HE teachers were selected using random stratified sampling according to the field of study.

A representative sample of 5,443 Belarusian HE graduates holding a first higher education degree were surveyed three years after their graduation, that is, the respondents graduated universities in the academic year of 2014/2015. The survey aimed at HE graduates with some experience in the professional field but also at ones with not forgotten university experience. The questionnaire given to the Belarusian HE graduates covered the following aspects: i) the main features of the university educational experience; ii) their professional trajectories since they obtained their university degrees; iii) the main characteristics of their job at the time of the survey; and iv) their competencies analysing what the required levels of competencies in their jobs were and how their university studies contributed to the development of their competencies.

A number of questions similar to those in the graduate questionnaire were also answered by a sample of 3,140 Belarusian HE teachers from the same eight universities. The questionnaire provided to the HE teachers covered the following aspects: i) teachers’ educational background and work experience; ii) the main characteristics of their job at their university; iii) contribution to HE graduates’ competency development, and

teaching and learning approaches applied in their study programme; iv) value of their study programme and opinion on the EHEA.

In addition, a few questions related to competencies were answered by 261 Belarusian employers from different companies around the country. The questionnaire to employers included the following aspects: i) company and organization characteristics; ii) level of contribution of Belarusian HE to ensuring a proper level of competencies to graduates and their employability (Mora and Bas, 2018).

Learning modes in Belarusian Higher Education

Some questionnaire items, in particular twelve characteristics, were related to the modes of teaching and learning emphasized in the study programme. The academic literature sources emphasise that the academic design of a study programme and teaching methods should be matched closely to learners' needs as they influence students' engagement and students' achievement (Lizzo et al., 2002; García-Aracil et al., 2018). The survey asked HE graduates and HE teachers about the predominant ways of teaching and learning in study programmes, and to evaluate the relevance of each mode from 1 (not relevant at all) to 5 (very relevant).

The data in Table 1 reveal that HE graduates think that more traditional ways of teaching and learning, such as lectures and seminars, assignments, and the role of the HE teacher as the main source of information, prevail in Belarusian HE. Practice-oriented and project-based learning or internships are fairly less common. In contrast, Belarusian HE teachers have quite a different opinion and put more value on most proactive ways of teaching and learning such as internships, projects and practices.

Table 1

Modes of teaching and learning emphasized in the study programme

Items	Graduates' opinion	Teachers' opinion
Lectures	4.34	4.11
Seminars	4.06	4.28
Written assignments	3.73	3.59
Oral presentations	3.73	3.74
Teacher as main source of information	3.67	3.20
Group assignments	3.46	3.91
Facts and instrumental knowledge	3.37	4.47
Practice	3.37	4.52
Theories, concepts and paradigms	3.27	3.66
Public discussions	3.25	4.19
Project and/or problem-based learning	3.11	4.03
Internships, work placements	2.31	4.10

Source: Own elaboration, FOSTERC data

While these differences in the teaching approaches and practices are sometimes assumed to be related to socio-cultural factors rather than cognition itself, it is important to highlight that for an effective student learning it is relevant to analyse the learning environment and course design for the improvement of learning outcomes for Belarusian future generations.

Diversity and interculturality in Belarusian Higher Education

Nowadays HE plays an important role in promoting the students' and teachers' competence in diversity and interculturality. "Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity" (UNESCO, 2001), "Guidelines on Intercultural Education" (UNESCO, 2006), "World Report Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue (UNESCO, 2009), the Bologna process (Bergen 2005, London, 2007), and the other international documents encourage us to contribute to dialogue, mutual understanding and knowledge exchange.

Among the other important abilities, the FOSTERC survey analysed Belarusian HE graduates' ability to communicate in a foreign language. The data show that Belarusian HE graduates have evaluated their own ability to communicate in a foreign language quite low. In addition, they pointed to a low need of using a foreign language at their recent work place. The FOSTERC survey data reveal that Belarusian HE teachers and employers expressed a higher level of need to use a foreign language during HE studies in Belarus and at the HE graduates' work place. The evaluation scale was from "1" to "5", where "1" meant "Very low" and "5" meant "Very high".

Table 2

Ability to communicate in a foreign language

Respondents	Provided	Required
HE graduates	3.2	3.1
HE teachers	3.6	4.3
Employers	3.3	3.9

Source: Own elaboration, FOSTERC data.

The data on the mobility of Belarusian HE teachers and HE graduates are among indicators that show if Belarusian HE graduates and HE teachers have possibilities of developing foreign language and intercultural skills. The FOSTERC survey asked teachers: "Did you spend any time abroad related to your training during higher education studies or post-graduation?" The obtained data revealed that 31 % of HE teachers had trainings abroad, whereas the majority of the respondents (69 %) did not have this opportunity.

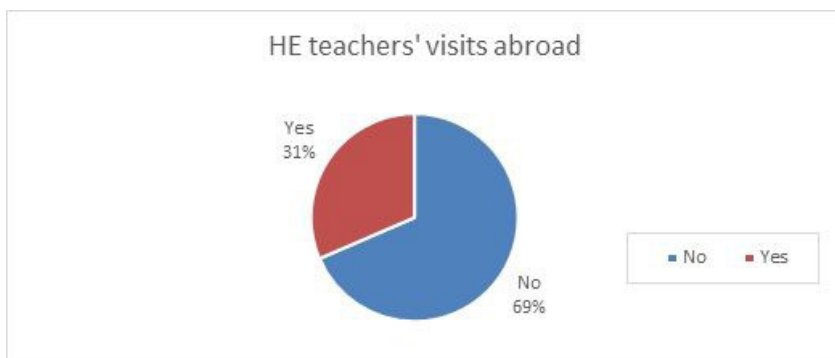


Figure 1. HE teachers' visits abroad during higher education studies or post-graduation
 Source: Own elaboration, FOSTERC data.

The FOSTERC survey asked Belarusian HE graduates: “Have you spent any time abroad since graduating from higher education institution?” 5 % of Belarusian HE graduates responded that they had had visits abroad since their graduation. In the scale “0” meant “No” and “1” meant “Yes”.

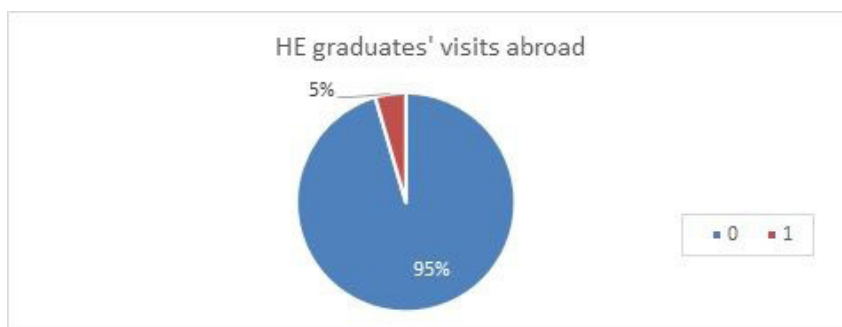


Figure 2. HE graduates' visits abroad since graduating from HE
 Source: Own elaboration, FOSTERC data.

The FOSTERC survey aimed to discover the attitudes of Belarusian HE teachers towards certain elements of the EHEA. Belarusian HE teachers were asked: “In your opinion, how important are such objectives of the EHEA as programmes for European university students’ mobility.” The scale from 1 to 5 was used to evaluate the attitude of HE teachers, where “1” meant “very low”, “5” meant “very high” level of importance. More than half (52 %) of the HE teachers in the survey expressed an opinion that HE students’ mobility was the EHEA objective of a very high importance.

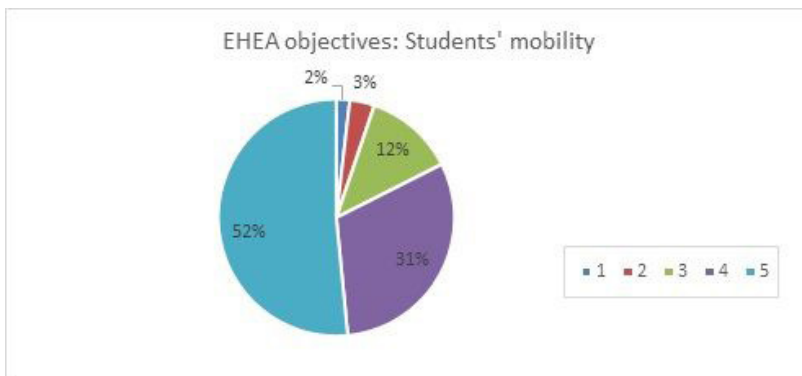


Figure 3. Importance of the EHEA objectives: European university students' mobility
 Source: Own elaboration, FOSTERC data.

The FOSTERC survey asked the teachers to express their opinions about the extent to which such objectives of EHEA as programmes for European university students' mobility are valued in their university. The scale from 1 to 5 was used, where "1" meant "very low" and "5" meant "very high". About one third (33 %) of Belarus higher education teachers pointed out that HE students' mobility was highly evaluated at their home university.

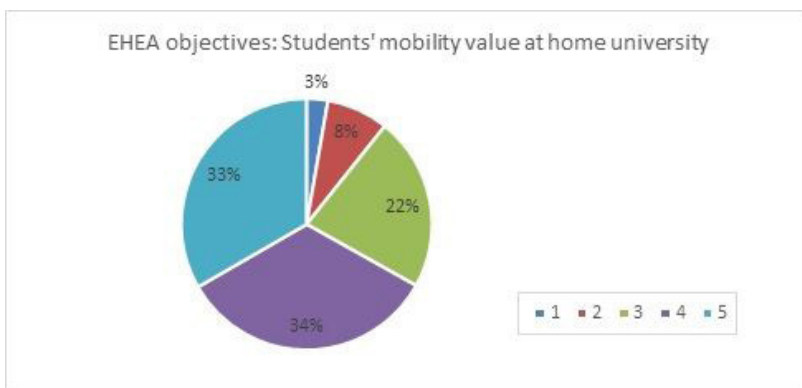


Figure 4. Importance of the EHEA objectives: European university students' mobility value at home university

Source: Own elaboration, FOSTERC data.

Recommendations

Despite the attention that has been paid to more student-centred and active forms of learning in recent years, a traditional form of learning with a strong emphasis on

lectures and on the role of the teacher as main source of information has still prevailed in Belarus and only a rather limited application of group learning and project or problem-based learning has been observed. Belarusian students are given little opportunity to gain hands on experience as a formal component of the study programme, and such experience usually takes the form of work placements and internships rather than participation in research projects. In this sense, the complementarity between education and research should be stronger fostered in Belarusian HE institutions.

The FOSTERC survey reveals a positive attitude of Belarusian HE teachers and institutes towards the EHEA objectives on students' mobility. At the same time data reveal insufficient numbers of visits of Belarusian HE teachers and HE graduates abroad. In this sense, the increased mobility of HE teachers and students in Belarus might promote the exchange and growth of knowledge in the new modes of learning in EHEA. The increased number of internships among Belarusian HE graduates might enhance their professional development within the framework of lifelong learning.

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Kompetencijomis grįsto mokymo(si) skatinimas Baltarusijos aukštojo mokslo srityje

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje yra aptariami iššūkiai, su kuriais susiduria Baltarusijos aukštasis mokslas, nuo 2015 m. siekdamas įgyvendinti Bolonijos proceso principus šalyje. Baltarusijos aukštojo mokslo sritis, pereinant nuo tradicinių prie Europos aukštojo mokslo erdvėje (EHEA) jau taikomų mokymo(si) būdų, išgyvena transformacijos laikotarpį.

Straipsnyje yra pristatomas Baltarusijos aukštojo mokslo srityje taikomų mokymo(si) būdų tyrimas, atliktas įgyvendinant Erasmus+ KA2 programos projektą „Kompetencijų tobulinimo skatinimas Baltarusijos aukštosiose mokyklose“ (FOSTERC). Straipsnyje yra aptariamoms galimybėms, kaip skatinti kompetencijomis grįsto mokymo(si) praktikų kūrimą Baltarusijos aukštojo mokslo srityje, taikant dėstytojų, studentų, aukštųjų mokyklų absolventų tarptautinio mobilumo bei mokymo(si) visą gyvenimą priemones.

Esminiai žodžiai: *aukštasis mokslas, mokymo(si) būdai, darbo rinka, įvairovė ir multikultūriškumas, mobilumas, stažuotė, mokymasis visą gyvenimą, Baltarusija.*

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