



EDUCATION IS A LIFELONG MISSION

Petar KOLEV *

*Dear Madam Rector,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen!*

I am extremely grateful to be honored with the honorary academic title "Doctor Honoris Causa" of one of the largest universities in Republic of Slovakia. This is a great honor for me and deserved recognition for the long-standing cooperation between the university which I represent and your university.

Dear colleagues, it took me a long time to decide what exactly my academic lecture could be. Initially, I was tempted to talk about my favorite Mechanics to which I devoted my life and professional career. After that I decided that this could be too boring for some of you, because it is a very specific and arid scientific matter.

Then I decided that it could be a good idea to share with you the achievements of my university within the scientific and research area. But it is largely known to most colleagues here - yet our cooperation goes back a long time.

Thus, I arrived at the decision to focus myself on an analysis of topic "EDUCATION IS A LIFELONG MISSION". At first glance, such a topic looks too philosophical for a scholar involved in the area of mechanics, as I am. But that's only at first glance. This topic, in its scope and scale, excites every educated person.

I'll start with our mission in education policy. In Bulgaria, November 1st is a holiday called "Day of the Bulgarian Enlighteners". Enlightener is a person who throughout his/her life actively promotes the priority of knowledge, national history, proper use of the mother language, and also the worship to native culture and national spirit.

In a more general sense, as Enlighteners we can consider all current and former scientific and educational workers who, although unknown to the general public, with their activities contribute to the spiritual and scientific development of young people. In this context, if we are serious about our mission, we are all Enlighteners. It is our responsibility to educate the young people, those who will come after us to work within the field of knowledge. For as it is written on a column in the ancient city

* Petar Kolev, Dr.h.c., professor, DSc, ing. mat. - Todor Kableshkov" University of Transport, 158 Geo Milev Str., Sofia, Bulgaria, tel.: +359 2 9709 241, mobile +359 887 926 348 , fax:+359 2 9709 242, petarkolev@abv.bg

Veliko Tarnovo, dating from the time of the Bulgarian ruler Omurtag, "However well a man may live, he dies and another man is born".

That is why our mission in education policy is so important. It is also important because we not only put in effect this politics but we participate in its construction. This policy has several dimensions - national, university and school level. But no one must be confined within a given level. Firstly, because these levels are connected and secondly because life brings surprises. Through time, you, yourself may prove a decisive factor within a given or higher level and you must be prepared.

We and you live in countries that contribute to the development of science and culture in a higher political and economic union such as the European Union.

We, as Enlighteners, are or have to be active persons in the design of rules, concepts and directives to build good practices, but not performers of someone else's will with an unexpected ending.

These are not only words, there are serious examples about that. Let us focus on something familiar to us all - "Bologna process".

Its purpose is to create a pan-European education area within higher education with the following postulates:

1. Understandable and comparable system of higher education
2. Adoption of a system that involves two main cycles:
 - First cycle – bachelor level at least three year duration, giving access to the European labor market with a certain degree of qualification or access to the second cycle training.
 - Second cycle - leading to master and later to doctoral degree
3. Utilization of a system of study credits;
4. Promoting mobility;
5. Enhancing cooperation in the field of training quality assessment;
6. Strengthening the European dimension in the higher education.

This all sounds good, but the opinions in the different EU countries for the implementation of the above - mentioned tasks, however, is not the same. In confirmation of this is the slow process of introducing a three-cycle education in the different countries, the coexistence of the national educational systems with "Bologna" system, the slow development of elements of that system, as well as the protests against "Bologna process" as a whole.

Thousands of students from many European countries gathered in protest on 11th of March, 2010 on the streets of Vienna, expressing their complete displeasure with "Bologna process" on the occasion of its 10th anniversary.

This widespread view is a clear sign of the awakening of the "80's and 90's generation" in Europe. It seems that the end of the story has never really started. Rather, this new beginning has yet to unfold its manifestations of alternatives and transformations.



Picture 1 Vienna protest, photo author

Students actively protest against the worst effects of the reform. There are different opinions and points of view regarding "Bologna system". For **officials**, no need to talk - by virtue of their positions, they are obliged to adopt the reform and usually their views on it boil down to common phrases in a positive sense. It is more interesting to know what students, towards whom the reform is directed, think.

In 2003 the European National Union of Students (ESIB - established in 1982 and unifying around 11 million young people from 37 European countries) divulged a summary on the results of Bologna process based on a student survey. The report showed a warm support to this process.

At this time, the students welcome the prospect of mobility that the Bologna strategy outlines because it means:

- Firstly - possibility of travels (thanks to the credit system);
- Secondly - opportunity to get a job in a country where employment conditions are better (thanks to mutual recognition of diplomas).

Among the positive aspects of the process are also :

- good opportunities for cooperation between universities;
- student participation in decision-making;
- good chance to explore other cultures;
- social orientation of the process, meaning equal access to higher education.

But two years later, in May 2005, ESIB published a new document, named by the authors "The Black Book of Bologna process" (www.esib.org/documents/blackbook.pdf). The book is created on the basis of materials provided by students from 31 countries of EU. As seen from the title, the document presents and discusses many problems of the reform. It is about:

- imperfection of the credit system;
- problems in the structure of Bachelor-Master system;
- problems concerning mobility implementation.

According to the book, all that is new and attractive, which is recorded in the Bologna documents in practice turns out to be "non-viable" and "infects with dead postulates" even the traditional strengths of European higher education. How low the level of education quality might be, to be a reason for students to complain even though they do not have enough knowledge and experience regarding professional areas!!!

It turns out that access to education has deteriorated sharply, contrary to what was said in 1999. In the Netherlands, for example, tuition fees were raised from 2000 to 15000 Euros per year. But simultaneously with the increase of fees, it is proved that the quality of education deteriorates. Moreover, student participation in decision-making is often suppressed. For example: over several years Swiss students struggled for their representatives to go in the National Council of Universities but it was deliberately refused. But students do not want to be "blind" users of what they are offered from "above"....

In Europe there are many more radical students compared to those who are members of ESIB. In Norway there is a group named Norsk Student Union (NSU), whose members are opposed to the Bologna process as a whole. They state that higher education is becoming a business increasingly oriented solely to the market and the quality level of mass education is deliberately reduced (Master degree is generally designed for a small percentage of students) - most students finish their education for three years with incomplete knowledge, inability to think and a distorted mentality, oriented only towards the market economy and profits. As far back as 2005 this movement of Norwegian students was taken over by their colleagues from another 40 student organizations in various European countries. These organizations even gathered in Berne at the European Forum on Education, which was held in parallel to the forum of officials concerning the Bologna process. These students offered some alternatives to Bologna concepts. Activists of this already pan-European student movement declared themselves for equal access to higher education, its separation from economic tendencies, education in the interest not only of entrepreneurs but of society as a whole.

Periodically, organizations belonging to this movement organize mass student protests in various countries:

- **In Berlin**, Germany, more than 100 000 students and teachers protested against the reduction of state subsidies to higher education.

- Many thousands took part in rallies and processions and passed **through Paris** and major French cities with slogans against the increase of tuition fees. These events were coordinated by the French National Union of Students.

- **In Italy**, thousands of students took part in "tent camps" against the commercialization of education. The National Union of Students was the organizer of these protests.

- **In Ireland** thousands of students protested under the flag of the Union of Students against the increase of tuition fees from \$ 650 to \$ 750 and the decline of education quality.

- **In Brussels**, Belgium, twelve thousand protested against the small role of students in education, insufficient social Insurance and education degrees that the government imposed even contrary to the Bologna system.

- **In Britain**, students managed to send into Parliament some representatives to protest against the increase of tuition fees.

- **In the Czech Republic**, hundreds of students, the Union of Rectors and the National Union of Students protested against the low budget that did not cover the needs of higher education.

- Mass student protest took place also **in Finland** against the reduction of teaching time at colleges and universities in eleven cities around the country.

- Student demonstrations were also organized **in Greece, Romania, Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina**.

There is no doubt that most protests were dictated by the interests of the students themselves, who opposed the interests of governments and business. Everywhere in Europe in the field of education there is a process of commercialization.

The Bologna reform seems to be designed to "legalize" these processes mentioned above. But things are changing thanks to us - the teachers.

Taking into account the wishes and problems of students, along with them teachers try to influence governments, whose ministers take part in summit meetings on the issues of the Bologna Process, e.g.:

1. The meeting in Paris in 2001 focused on:

- Development of lifelong learning;
- Involvement of higher education institutions and students in educational reform.

2. The meeting in Berlin in 2003 focused on:

- ensuring the education quality at institutional, national and European level.
- recognition of degrees and periods of study, including providing free Diploma Supplement for all graduates from 2005 onwards.
- developing a comprehensive network of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.
- Inclusion of the doctoral degree as the third cycle in the education process.
- promoting closer links between the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area.

3. Bergen, 2005 – accents were:

- strengthening the social dimension and removing obstacles to mobility;
- development of a national qualifications frameworks in line with the framework of qualifications regarding the European Higher Education Area;
- creating opportunities for flexible rules in higher education, including procedures for recognition of prior learning.

4. At the meeting in Leuven, 2009 – accents were:

- each country to define measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of under-represented social groups in higher education by the end of the next decade;

- by 2020 at least 20% of graduates in the European Higher Education Area should have had a period of study abroad;
- quality education and training of students must become the major goal of ongoing curriculum reform.

Ending my presentation I want to note the high efficiency in one of the postulates of the Bologna process, namely - the cooperation between our two universities. It dates back to the last century - between us, as a former military university, and your military faculty.

After the demilitarization - our cooperation extended to other faculties - communication equipment, construction, economics, technology and management of transport. We have shared experience and good practices concerning the curriculum, programs for various courses, etc.

We have also developed joint research projects, educational and scientific literature. We participated in many scientific conferences in both universities. We exchanged teachers and students to implement teaching or study nobilities under the Erasmus programme.

Scientists from both universities are members of the editorial boards of scientific journals, members of the program committees of conferences organized by our institutions.

This cooperation contributed to the academic growth of some colleagues who are now associate professors and professors.

It is an honor for me to mention some of them – prof. Rusko Vulkov, prof. Daniela Todorova, prof. Nikolay Georgiev, prof. Emil Jelezov, prof. Detelin Vasilev, prof. Antonio Andonov, assoc. prof. Emilia Vaysilova, assoc. prof. Vasko Dimitrov, dr.h.c. prof. Tatiana Corejova, prof. Ladislav Simak, prof. Pavel Polednak, prof. Zdenek Dvorak, assoc. prof. Ladislav Novak, assoc.prof. Bohus Leitner, assoc. prof. Stanislava Strelcova , assoc. prof. Eva Sventeková and many others.

That is why all my life I am guided by the wisdom of an ancient Indian proverb: "Don't tear the thread of friendship, because even in case of its restoration a knot will remain!"

CONCLUSIONS

Dear colleagues, from all I have shared with you it follows that in the politics of life there are successes but there are failures as well. There are lots of optimists round about us but at the same time we meet many pessimists who say - whatever you think - it all is predetermined. But according to Cicero: "To live means to think!"

I will finish with a thought of the great Gil Stern: "Both optimists and pessimists contribute to our society. The optimist invents the airplane and the pessimist the parachute."