

**IPSA (RC 32) 2013 Conference**  
*‘Europeanization of public administration and policy:  
sharing values, norms and practices’*  
April 4-7, 2013, CAAS, Dubrovnik, Croatia

University of Zagreb  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
PhD program in Comparative politics

**The effects of the European higher education initiatives on the national policy making –  
Case study of Croatia**

PhD Research proposal

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### RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The research objective is to analyze the relationship between the European higher education initiatives and its implementation on the national level and its effects. More precisely to analyze the position of the first tier (Bachelor) presented in the Bologna Declaration through mutual relation between institutional level (seven Croatian universities), system level authority and employers using neo-institutional approach – historical institutionalism. The goal is to analyze the transfer of the policy from the European level to the national, to explain effects of this process and to see if it is specific due to the relation among policy actors or it is similar to other cases.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the roles of policy actors – state, universities and employers – in implementation of European higher education initiatives (case of the Bachelor level in Croatia)? And what are the results of implemented heterogeneous system of higher education?
2. To which extent Bachelor diploma holders, as a product of European higher education initiatives and its implementation on the national level, are recognizable at the labor market and employable? How is the relation between the national policy actors (universities, authority and employers) structured in order to regulate position of Bachelor diploma holders?
3. What are the effects of the position of Bachelor diploma holders on the structure of Master programs?

The answers to these research questions should provide two types of information. On the one hand, there is an interaction between European level and different national actors through process of acceptance of European higher education initiatives. It is highly important to

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understand when, how and why these initiatives were implemented and what role each of these actors had in that process. It is necessary to understand how their interpretation of Bologna process and specific application influenced on the development of the first tier of higher education system. On the other hand, this research would provide deeper insight into the position of specific higher education policy. The problems related to the employability and recognition of Bachelor diploma holders were covered in high extent by researchers in other European countries. (Schomburg and Teichler, 2011) However, this problem in Croatia was not covered enough or at all until now. The goal is to show who where the key actors, to track their decisions-making process and their mutual relation in order to explain employability and recognition of first tier. Also, it is important to create a feasible foundation for explanation of further development in this area.

## CURRENT SITUATION AND BACKGROUND

### EUROPEAN LEVEL

The idea of European Higher Education Area was created after Sorbonne and Bologna declaration and all EU member and candidate states are part of this project. The Bologna declaration was signed in 1999 by 29 countries and the main idea was to include all European countries regardless of their relation with the European Union. The EU decided to embrace promoted ideas and gave support to this vision through the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. Until today, 47 countries signed Bologna declaration.

The main goals stated in Bologna declaration are focused on the establishment of the EHEA through the system of comparable and easily readable diplomas, three-tier system (Bachelor, Master and Doctorate), academic mobility and transferable credit system. To ensure this, ministers of education agreed to have bi-annual meetings, to establish follow-up groups, national committees and national Bologna groups. This should result with more attractive and competitive European universities. (Voegtler et al., 2010)

As Kehm and Teichler (2006) point out – one of the most important ideas in the Bologna process is reform of higher education through introduction of the tiered structure. At the

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beginning it was imagined as a two-tier system (Bachelor and Master) and later as a three-tier system (Doctorate). Moreover, it is highlighted that one of the effects of the Bologna declaration should be: “to trigger curricular reforms in the framework of which “labour market relevant” qualifications for students were to be more strongly promoted and particularly taken into consideration in the design of bachelor programmes” (Kehm and Tecihler, 2006: 270)

Bologna declaration states that: “The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification” (Bologna declaration, 1999). Alesi (2007) considers this as a clear statement that Bachelor programs should not be designed only as the preparation for Master programs, but also to enable Bachelor diploma holders to enter the labour market. The main idea is to create more differentiated system of higher education which enables to students who have finished different levels of education to be competitive on the labour market. Furthermore, the same idea was promoted in Berlin Communique of 2003 and it was stated that position, understanding and acceptance of the new qualifications should be improved through mutual dialogue of higher education institutions and employers. In order to be successful, this idea requires involvement of different policy actors – system level authority, higher education institutions and employers.

There are four main points which can be highlighted – initiative started at the European level (by the ministers of education) and it was implemented in 47 countries, two (three) tier structure is proposed as one of the main goals of Bologna declaration, Bachelor degree holders are supposed to be recognized at the labour market, mutual dialogue among policy actors is necessary in order to achieve proposed goals. Clearly, the intention of Bologna declaration was to offer new system of higher education and enable to student to become competitive on the labour market after the first tier. However, since there are no higher jurisdiction which can impose certain coercion the whole process is basically in the hands of national actors. It is clear that all these points are extremely relevant for the higher education policies and they are covered by my research questions. The answers to these questions should show how these policies were introduced in Croatia and the effects on the employability of the Bachelor degree holders.

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### FINDINGS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Proposed research questions closely related to the position of Bachelor diploma holders were covered in different countries in order to investigate whether Bologna declaration produces positive or negative outcomes. There are papers which cover United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Norway and Poland (Schomburg and Teichler, 2011). However, the authors of these studies focused their surveys on graduates and their perception and experience regarding employability. Since I have no time and resources to cover student population in that extent, I have decided to focus on other important policy actors and data which can provide relevant answers to the similar research questions. In my opinion, through this research it is possible to set a ground for future one which can be more encompassing.

The conclusions of these studies show that most of the students (up to three quarters in some countries) continue their education and those who do not continue have problems with employment (only half of them are employed). Similar conclusions are made by Luzzatto et al. (2011). They point out that there are difficulties in matching competencies gained at the universities with those requested by economic sector. Also, two trends are noticed – low salaries for Bachelor degree holders at the labour market and high percentage of students who continue their education after the first level. It is clear that the common trend among some European countries was found. As Schomburg claims: “a mix of warnings by university professors about an incompleteness of Bachelor study at universities, half-hearted curricular reforms, cautious views by employers and uncertainties and high aspirations by students has led to such high rates of further study”. (2011: 271) In line with this, I want to show whether or not Croatia follows these trends and how policy actors participated in this process. My position is that students’ decision regarding further education or seeking for employment is determinate in high proportion by institutional surrounding and context in which they operate. This means that decision makers, higher education institutions and employers through their institutional decisions and implementation of Bologna Declaration created unfavorable institutional surrounding for the Bachelor diploma holders.

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According to Eurydice 2010 there is no standardization in higher education systems – 19 countries introduced 3+2 system, six introduced 4+2, four countries 4 year BA and one and a half year MA. Also, in some fields two-tier system was not introduced (medicine, pharmacy, veterinary medicine). The other countries have heterogeneous models of higher education with different variations in the length of study programmes. This heterogeneity is allowed within the Bologna process since Declaration leaves a possibility to introduce different structures. However, this can affect differences in employability of Bachelors and their decision to continue with education (e.g. Are 3 year and 4 year BA degrees differently perceived by employers?)

All these questions were not covered in Croatian case until now. It is clear that studies related to Bachelor diploma holders and their position on the market labour are relevant. Thus, this kind of study is necessary if we want to be able to compare Croatian case with the other countries which introduced Bologna declaration.

#### **CROATIA**

Croatia joined the Bologna process in 2001 when Bologna declaration was signed by Croatian minister of science and education. With this signature Croatia took obligation to reform its higher education system according to Bologna declaration guidelines until 2010. Furthermore, the Educational Sector Development Plan 2005 – 2010 was adopted in 2001 and this document defined the goals in higher education. One of the goals is to develop strong connections between the education and labour market in order to create higher education system which is able to answer to the demands of market and society. Also, this should increase employability of diploma holders. Clearly, the idea promoted on the European level was embraced by the national actors and introduced policy arena through document and decisions.

After the joining the Bologna process the new higher education law was introduced in 2003 and first academic programmes started in 2005. According to Agency for Science and Higher Education today there are: 7 public universities, 3 private universities, 67 faculties and

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academies, 2 private polytechnics, 13 public polytechnics, 27 private colleges and 3 public colleges. At seven public universities there are 351 undergraduate programs, 45 integrated undergraduate and graduate programmes, 368 graduate programmes, 174 postgraduate specialist programmes and 102 postgraduate university (doctoral) study programmes. Closely related, Croatia has established heterogeneous higher education system. There are two different two-tier programmes – 3+2 and 4+1. Also, there are 45 integrated undergraduate and graduate programmes. This is highly heterogeneous system which can effect on the understanding and acceptance of the Bachelor diplomas by the employers. Confusion and diversity may lead toward avoidance of Bachelor diploma holders.

In order to understand obligations and position of different actors it is important to present the organization of the higher education in Croatia (the main policy actors). Parliament and Government (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports) are responsible for legislature, development and funding. In these fields they closely cooperate with National Council for Science, National Council for Education, Science and Higher Education Funding Council, National Bologna Follow-up Group, Croatian Innovation System Council etc. Next, in the field of monitoring, evaluating, system development and program implementation the most important institution is Agency for Science and Higher Education. In the end, there are institutions responsible for conduction of programmes – higher education institutions, scientific institutions, and technological, research and development centers.

Regarding Bachelor university diploma holders it is important to notice that according to Croatian Employment Service there is a relatively small number of registered Bachelors and small percentage of them is employed (if that number is compared to the number of students enrolled into university programmes and to the number of students who have finished Master programmes). This implicates that there are certain problems with employability of Bachelor diploma holders and recognition of their diplomas on the labour market. However, this is not the final conclusion, but only insight based on preliminary research. It is necessary to see how did policy actors (state, universities and employers), through implementation of European policy and decision making, created environment which influences employability and recognition of the Bachelors.

Again, there are several important points that can be highlighted – the important goal in Croatian higher education is to improve relationship between the higher education institutions

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and labour market, heterogeneous higher education system is introduced, main policy actors are recognized and basic position of Bachelor diploma holders on the labour market is presented. Also, the basic insight into the implementation of the Bologna system in Croatia shows that there are certain problems related to the introduction of the first tier, employability of the Bachelors and recognition of their diplomas.

## THEORETICAL APPROACH

### HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Historical institutionalism is one of the schools of thought within new institutionalism approach. The authors within this school define institutions “as the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy” (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 938). The institutions are seen as independent variables which are used to explain political changes. They are stable and durable, but they are also adaptable if it is necessary. However, the change and policy decisions depend on the endogenous institutional factors which occurred during the formation of institution or through institutional development. In historical institutionalism this is known as path dependence – the important decisions or choices made at the beginning determine and limit possible choices in the future. In order to introduce changes and different path it is necessary to assure strong political pressure (Peters, 1999).

Furthermore, this approach divides “the flow of historical events into periods of continuity punctuated by “critical junctures”, i.e., moments when substantial institutional change takes place thereby creating a “branching point” from which historical development moves onto a new path” (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 942). Also, historical institutionalism claims that institutions are based on ideas and institutions should be evaluated according to their ability to create policies that effectively implement those ideas.

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I would say that the acceptance of Bologna declaration represent a critical juncture within the institution of (Croatian) higher education (according to definition – formal procedure embedded in the organizational structure of the polity) and puts higher education system onto a new path through which the Bologna process becomes the main characteristic. This change created new guidelines and framework for policy actors and their possible choices. If we take into account that the institutional change and new path of higher education are based on ideas covered with Bologna declaration then system of higher education should be evaluated according to the policies based on this declaration. In this case, I would concentrate on position of BA tier and employability of Bachelor degree holders since these ideas are substantive part of Bologna declaration. Also, since policy actors have to operate within the new institutional environment it is necessary to detect their mutual relation and roles. As it is possible to see, these are the main research questions which I am interested in.

Surely, there are certain disadvantages of this approach such as inability to predict the change (it is possible to explain it only a posteriori). Also, historical institutionalists have problems with generalizations since the analysis is closely related with the context of the specific case and they often neglect the role of agents and put emphasis on structures. However, I think that through historical institutionalism it is possible to understand the context in which the main policy actors operate and their roles. In order to analyze communication, transfer and implementation of ideas I would use discursive institutionalism.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In order to answer to the proposed research question questions I would use combination of different sources of data. This combination includes analysis of important documents, questionnaires for employers, elite interviews with representatives of higher education institutions and analysis of existing data.

- a) Document analysis (Croatian documents, international documents)

The analysis of the important national and international documents would provide information about general ideas promoted on these two levels. They ensure starting point and background information about institutions within which policy actors operate and their roles. These

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documents include various laws, acts, declarations, communiqués and strategic plans. In my opinion, this kind of documents contain basic policy actors’ (policy makers’) ideas through which it is possible to identify their position in policy area. Thus, this would be a first step of analysis in which I would identify institutional framework, policy actors and their basic ideas. Once the framework is defined and main institutional arrangements detected it would be easier to continue with the analysis and providing the answers to the proposed research questions.

b) Questionnaires (employers)

Through semi structured questionnaires I would collect information related to the employers in private and public sector. This method enables insight into their discourses and their perception of the policies. Also, it would provide information regarding employability of Bachelor degree holders. In order to evaluate employability it is necessary to find out the employers’ perception of competences acquired by students during their education, motivation to employ or not to employ Bachelors, problems whit other actors in policy arena and problems in current higher education system.

c) Elite interviews (rectors or prorectors)

The elite interview is a qualitative method through which it is possible to gather pieces of information that are not observable otherwise (subjective points of view, life histories, events that have not been (fully) documented, complex processes that are only partially documented, dicourses). Elites can provide information known only to the narrow set of people. Interviewing elites is usually conducted as semistandardized type of the interview. In the semistandardized interviews interviewers are using a list of questions. However, they are allowed to ask questions which are not on their list and they do not have to respect the order of questions. (Myers and Newman 2007). It is appropriate to have open-ended questions which allow elites to explain their position and views. This is also important for gathering additional information whose importance may have been overlooked in the design and which are important for study. Regarding sampling, it is easy since the choice is not broad. Through elite interviews I would collect information regarding the position of universities, their discourses, organization of Bachelor programmes and expected competencies of graduates. I believe that rectors and prorectors as leading figures of universities are able to provide

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required information since they are involved in organization and coordination of study programmes.

#### d) Data analysis (Croatian Employment Service and Croatian Bureau of Statistics)

The available data includes number of employed and unemployed Bachelor degree holders and number of students enrolled in Bachelor and Master programmes in last five years (available for each year). Surely, this kind of data is not completely reliable (some graduates did not register at employment service), but this is the only available data and it provides approximately accurate information about employment and unemployment of graduates. Also, it is possible to find out the number of students who decided to continue their education after they finished first tier and number of those who decided to enter the labour market. Furthermore, there is data gathered among students regarding their satisfaction with the provided education and their perception of gained competencies and competitiveness on the labour market gained after finishing first tier of education.

These sources of data would provide information about main policy actors in the higher education system and the employability of bachelor degree holders. Definitely, there are certain factors, such as economic crisis, which is necessary to take into account. It is normal to expect that employability will be disrupted during the period of economic crisis. In Croatia it is hard to compare employability of Bachelors before and after the economic crisis since the Bologna system was introduced in 2005/2006 and the first Bachelors were entering the labour market in 2009 when the crisis already started. In my opinion, it is possible to partially control this factor with certain type of questions which will be proposed to employers in questionnaires. Also, it is possible to see if there are serious disproportions between the percentage of unemployed Bachelors and other groups (e.g. Master diploma holders). The research in previously mentioned countries was conducted between 2006 and 2010. Thus, some of these results depict situation before or at the beginning of the crisis and they do not vary significantly due to the crisis. (Schomburg and Teichler, 2011)

Outline

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The thesis will be consisted of at least six units. In the introduction I will present the relevance of the topic, research questions, hypotheses and final goal of the thesis. Next, the first chapter will cover relevant literature review and critical overview of that literature in order to present my starting point in this research. The second chapter will provide theoretical framework for the analysis of the presented problem. In other words, I will define main relations among policy actors and set borders for my sandbox. The third chapter will contain explanation of the methodological tools which will be used in the research and their positive and negative characteristics for this kind of topic. In the next chapter I will present findings and main results of my research in order to see if my hypotheses were refuted or confirmed. Also, I will present conclusions regarding presented problems. Finally, in the last chapter, I will present possible policy solutions and feasible foundation for explanation of further development in this area.

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