EMI

Across Languages, Disciplines, and Contexts



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Letraria®

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2. Aligning With Europe Through Language Policy, Bologna and the Internationalization of Higher Education in North Macedonia

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Abstract: Europe is characterized by remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity, with more than 250 languages spoken across the continent. The European Union (EU) promotes this diversity through a language policy that values multilingualism, language proficiency, and respect for linguistic and cultural plurality. At the same time, the Bologna Process seeks to harmonize higher education systems by facilitating academic cooperation, mobility, and degree comparability. Although they follow different approaches, both initiatives contribute to the shared goal of internationalizing higher education. This paper examines the relationship between European language policy and the Bologna Process, focusing on their combined influence on the internationalization of higher education in North Macedonia, a candidate country for EU membership. It outlines the principles and key instruments of both frameworks and discusses how they support international cooperation and educational integration. The European language policy provides the communicative foundations for mobility and collaboration through instruments such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the promotion of multilingualism. The Bologna Process complements this by establishing structural mechanisms, including the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, and joint degrees, which facilitate student and staff mobility, institutional cooperation, and the recognition of qualifications. The paper argues that, despite their distinct objectives and instruments, European language policy and the Bologna Process are mutually reinforcing. Together, they create the linguistic and structural conditions that foster the internationalization of higher education and support North Macedonia's integration into the European Higher Education Area.

Keywords: European language policy, multilingualism, Bologna Process, internationalization, higher education, North Macedonia.

Introduction

A critical factor in shaping language policy is the need to acquire foreign language skills. This necessity arises in many areas of everyday life, such as the development of international relations, diplomacy, foreign trade, mobility of scientific personnel, translation of scientific and artistic literature, and the education system (e.g., student mobility). Foreign language knowledge is increasingly regarded as economic capital rather than strictly cultural wealth for an individual, as it represents one of the most important skills considered by employers during the hiring process. Therefore, investing in foreign language learning benefits both individuals and society as a whole (Beadle et al., 2015). As noted by the European Commission (2016), language competences are indispensable for mobility, cooperation, and mutual understanding across borders (see also Beadle et al., 2017). Mobility and internationalization are among the key aspects of the Bologna Process, a reform of higher education that leads towards internationalization. The comparison between the European Union and the United States serves to highlight two contrasting approaches to linguistic diversity. While the United States has historically relied on English as the dominant language in public life despite its multilingual population, the European

Union has adopted multilingualism as a fundamental value, recognizing all official languages of its Member States and actively promoting linguistic diversity through education and policy. This distinction provides an important context for understanding why language policy occupies such a central place in the European integration process. Alongside these language policy developments, the Bologna Process, launched in 1999 through the Bologna Declaration signed by ministers from 29 European countries, introduced a common framework for higher education based on comparable degree structures, quality assurance, academic mobility, and mutual recognition of qualifications. Although the European Language Policy and the Bologna Process originated from different policy domains, together they have become complementary pillars supporting the internationalization of higher education across Europe. In light of these developments, this paper explores how the European Language Policy and the Bologna Process together contribute to the internationalization of higher education in North Macedonia, a candidate country for European Union membership. It examines how these complementary European initiatives, i.e., one fostering multilingualism and respect for linguistic diversity, the other harmonizing degree structures and promoting mobility, jointly facilitate cooperation, comparability, and competitiveness within the broader European Higher Education Area. The study offers insights into North Macedonia's implementation of these frameworks and their effects on the country's educational integration and international positioning. From an ICLHE perspective, these policy developments are also relevant because internationalization and multilingualism increasingly shape how disciplinary knowledge is taught, learned, and communicated in higher education. Mobility, multilingual repertoires, and the growing use of additional languages in academic settings create conditions in which language development and content learning cannot always be treated as separate processes. European language policy and the Bologna Process can therefore also be understood as providing part of the broader policy environment within which integrated approaches to content and language in higher education have developed.

European Language Policy: Principles and Tools

The European Union (EU) distinguishes itself through its commitment to preserving and promoting the linguistic and cultural diversity within its territory, recognizing multilingualism as one of its fundamental values. Since its inception, the EU has regarded multiculturalism and multilingualism as defining characteristics of European integration. Promoting and supporting multilingualism is part of the fundamental principles of European language policy. The EU actively develops language policy, which aims to define the role of languages within the education system. EU language policies promote reforms in the education system, specifically in the process of learning foreign languages. These reforms concern changes in curriculum development, teaching plans, textbooks, assessments, and the organization of the teaching process, including teaching methodologies for foreign languages. The goal is to plan and introduce multilingual teaching that will prepare students for a multilingual world (European Commission, 2016). The foundation for these reforms is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

(CEFR), originally published in 2001 and updated through the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020), which reflects the current reference framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment across Europe.

Multilingualism in European Language Policy

Within European language policy, multilingualism is regarded as a fundamental value and a key objective of education, cultural cooperation, and social integration. According to the CEFR, multilingual competence extends beyond the knowledge of several languages and emphasizes the ability to draw on different linguistic and cultural resources in communication. This approach reflects the European Union's commitment to linguistic diversity, intercultural dialogue, and lifelong language learning. In 2007, the Union introduced the position of European Commissioner for Multilingualism to advance and protect multilingualism in member countries. Leonard Orban, the first commissioner (serving from 2007 to 2010), promoted practical benefits of multilingualism, emphasizing how language knowledge positively influences careers and businesses (Orban, 2009). Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity supports a healthy multilingual economy and grants citizens access to EU legislation in their languages (Kużelewska, 2014, pp. 2-4). Multilingualism continues to be a fundamental principle of European language policy. According to CEFR documentation (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4), the aims of European language policy include:

- preparing Europeans for enhanced international mobility and cooperation across education, culture, science, trade, and industry;
- promoting mutual understanding, tolerance, respect for identities, and effective international communication;
- maintaining and developing the richness of European cultural life through better mutual knowledge of national and regional languages, including less commonly taught languages;
- meeting the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe by enhancing Europeans' ability to communicate regardless of linguistic and cultural boundaries;
- avoiding risks resulting from marginalization of those lacking necessary communication skills in an interactive Europe.

Key Characteristics of Multilingualism

According to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, as cited in Stoycheva, 2006), the key characteristics of multilingualism are:

- Multilingualism is a complex communicative ability that includes all the languages a person masters (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 15, 163);

- The knowledge and experiences gained through learning a language spread within one's cultural environment, starting from the family language, through the language of the entire society, to other languages studied at school or acquired through direct contact with speakers of languages different from one's own. These languages and cultures are not "stored" in separate mental compartments but are mutually interconnected;
- In multilingual communicative competence, languages are mutually connected and influence each other;
- Linguistic and cultural competences in one language modify competences in another language;
- Multilingual competence forms part of broader multicultural competence. However, the development of communicative ability and cultural competence are not always directly correlated;
- Multilingual and multicultural competences are variable and uneven because an individual acquires different levels of competence in the languages they study, and the multicultural profile differs from the multilingual profile of the person (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 163).

Multilingual and multicultural competences allow combinations and transformations of various kinds. This means it enables "switching" from one language to another, the use of mixed linguistic forms, and mediation between languages. The Common European Framework precisely defines the objectives of foreign language teaching, directed towards the development of multilingualism. These objectives have evolved - the goal of foreign language teaching is no longer the mastery of different languages learned in isolation from one another, but rather the development of a spectrum of languages. Language learning and the development of multilingual competence are considered lifelong tasks. Education systems should broaden the range of languages available for selection by interested learners, thereby ensuring opportunities to develop multilingual competence. Motivation, ability, and self-confidence should be encouraged in young people to face new challenges beyond school. The responsibility of educational institutions, examination committees, teachers, and professors should not be limited to achieving a certain level of proficiency but should continue through lifelong learning and improvement processes.

The Bologna Process and Internationalization

The Bologna Process is one of the largest reforms of higher education in Europe. It is the result of many years of educational reform within the European Union (EU) and across Europe more broadly. The main idea was to promote student mobility and, more recently, degree recognition (Roper, 2007, p. 52), meaning that education systems would become more similar so that students could study more easily in different countries and have their degrees recognized internationally. The reforms were designed to create a common European space in higher education, which would help prepare a highly skilled workforce able to compete worldwide. In other words, the Bologna Process was about building a knowledge-based society that would be

strong in the global market. It was also meant to be a shared strategic framework for countries to exchange educational policies and experiences, while at the same time making Europe more attractive and competitive economically (Munar, 2007, p. 80). The Bologna Process officially began with the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 by ministers from 29 European countries. Its primary objective was to establish the European Higher Education Area through comparable degree structures, quality assurance, and enhanced student and staff mobility. The ministers once again emphasized that compatible and comparable qualifications and systems were essential to increase the attractiveness and "international competitiveness of the European system of higher education" (European Ministers of Education, 1999, p. 2).

The Bologna Declaration set out six main goals for reform. One of the central commitments was the introduction of a two-cycle degree system: the first cycle lasting at least three years and leading to a qualification "relevant to the labor market" (European Ministers of Education, 1999, p. 3), and the second cycle leading to a master's or doctoral degree. To make qualifications easier to understand and compare across countries, ministers introduced the Diploma Supplement, already integrated into the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and agreed to implement a credit transfer system to promote student mobility. Another priority was to remove barriers to mobility not only for students, but also for teachers, researchers, and administrative staff. Quality assurance was also emphasized to develop comparable criteria and methodologies across national systems. In addition, the ministers highlighted the importance of a European perspective in higher education, particularly in curriculum design, cooperation between institutions, mobility programs, and integrated study, training, and research.

As countries began implementing the reforms to build the European Higher Education Area, they adopted and developed three main tools: the Diploma Supplement, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and qualifications frameworks. While only a few countries had developed national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) at the beginning, aligning them with a European framework soon became a key priority to support structural reforms (European Higher Education Area, 2023, pp. 22–23).

The Bologna Process has not only reflected internationalization of European higher education but has also actively promoted it. Internationalization has been one of its key strategies, closely linked to the broader goal of creating a unified and competitive European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (European Higher Education Area, 2020). This focus on internationalization emphasizes the need for higher education systems to respond to globalization by promoting academic cooperation across borders, facilitating the mobility of students and staff, and supporting the international recognition of qualifications. In addition, the goal of internationalization fits with broader European policies that promote intercultural dialogue, economic competitiveness, and lifelong learning (European Commission, 2005). The Erasmus+ program, an important tool supporting Bologna objectives, demonstrates how mobility and cooperation strengthen both the capacity of institutions and the development of individuals, while also reinforcing the strategic goal of internationalization (European Commission, 2016, 2017). By supporting internationalization,

the Bologna Process not only standardizes higher education but also encourages the sharing of knowledge, cultural experiences, and economic opportunities beyond national borders, which is crucial for Europe's position in the world (Munar, 2007; Roper, 2007). Although the implementation of the Bologna Process has presented challenges across different national contexts and has been the subject of critical debate, its contribution to the internationalization of higher education remains one of its most significant and enduring achievements.

Internationalization of higher education has been defined as encompassing activities, programs, and services related to international studies, educational exchange, and technical cooperation (Arum & van de Water, 1992). Building on this understanding, Knight (2008) conceptualizes internationalization as the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education. It encompasses student and staff mobility, academic cooperation, curriculum development, and international recognition of qualifications. Within the European context, internationalization is closely linked to the Bologna Process and European language policy, both of which provide the framework for strengthening cooperation, multilingualism, and mobility across higher education institutions.

Multilingualism and internationalization in higher education in North Macedonia

Multilingualism in higher education in North Macedonia is structured around the CEFR, with study programs aligned to its defined proficiency levels to ensure standardized language learning outcomes. Across all programs, mandatory learning of more than one foreign language is required. English is the dominant foreign language; however, other languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian are also taught depending on the specific curriculum. These reforms aim to promote multilingualism and cultivate multilingual individuals equipped for broader mobility and intercultural engagement. North Macedonia officially joined the Bologna Process by signing the Declaration in September 2003. Through this commitment, Macedonian educational institutions pledged to implement key elements of the process, including:

- Establishing a unified European Higher Education Area;
- Ensuring student and academic staff mobility and recognition of diplomas through the universal application of ECTS;
- Introducing three-cycle study structures culminating in comparable diplomas supplemented by the Diploma Supplement;
- Improving the quality of educational services in academic institutions;
- Strengthening scientific research activities as a foundation for higher education advancement.

These reforms have gradually been implemented across higher education institutions in North Macedonia. All public universities now apply the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation

System (ECTS), issue the Diploma Supplement, and organize studies according to the three-cycle structure. Participation in Erasmus+ mobility programmes has expanded opportunities for students and academic staff to study, teach, and train at partner universities across Europe. According to the Erasmus+ Country Factsheet for the Republic of North Macedonia, higher education represents the largest share of mobility projects under the programme, demonstrating the active engagement of Macedonian higher education institutions in European academic cooperation and mobility initiatives (European Commission, 2023).

The 2023 Bologna Process Implementation Report notes that while student and staff mobility from North Macedonia has increased, it still falls below the European average, reflecting ongoing efforts needed to enhance internationalization and cross-border cooperation (European Higher Education Area, 2023). Moreover, lifelong learning initiatives and the integration of digital language learning tools are increasingly recognized as vital pathways to fostering multilingual competence beyond formal education settings (European Commission, 2020). Participation in Erasmus+ mobility programs has contributed positively to the development of language competences and intercultural skills among students and academic staff, further supporting internationalization objectives (European Commission, 2016). Research further corroborates the positive impact of multilingual skills on graduates' employability and competitiveness in the European labor market (Cedefop, 2019). These interconnected efforts continue to drive the progress towards a more inclusive, multilingual, and internationally engaged higher education system in North Macedonia. Nevertheless, the long-term success of these reforms depends not only on adopting European frameworks but also on ensuring their consistent implementation across higher education institutions. Continued investment in language education, academic staff development, digital learning resources, and international cooperation will be essential for North Macedonia to fully realize the objectives of multilingualism and internationalization. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that North Macedonia has made substantial progress in aligning its higher education system with European language policy and Bologna objectives, although continued institutional development remains necessary to ensure the consistent implementation of these reforms across the sector.

Conclusion

The integration of European language policy and the Bologna Process has significantly shaped the internationalization of higher education in North Macedonia through the adoption of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, CEFR-based language policies, and increased participation in Erasmus+ mobility programmes. The European Language Policy promotes multilingualism as an essential competence, fostering communication skills necessary for mobility and intercultural understanding within the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Process, through its structural reforms such as the adoption of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, and degree harmonization, complements this language policy by creating transparent, comparable, and compatible study frameworks.

Together, these two pathways advance North Macedonia's alignment with European standards and facilitate student and staff mobility, institutional cooperation, and enhanced employability of graduates. The mandatory learning of multiple foreign languages and adherence to CEFR proficiency levels ensure that graduates are linguistically equipped for the demands of international academic and labor markets.

Moreover, the sustained commitment to Bologna reforms strengthens the quality of the country's higher education system and its participation in the global knowledge economy. As Knight (2008) argues, internationalization is a process of integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education. Similarly, the Council of Europe (2020) emphasizes that plurilingual and intercultural competence are fundamental for democratic participation, social cohesion, and lifelong learning. Together, these perspectives reinforce the importance of sustained investment in foreign language learning as a foundation for employability, intercultural competence, and academic and professional mobility. This investment not only enriches individuals culturally and professionally but also aligns with the EU's vision of fostering intercultural dialogue, mobility, and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world. These intertwined efforts contribute to building a multilingual, mobile, and competitive educational environment that supports North Macedonia's ambitions for European integration and global academic collaboration.

Continued implementation and development of these policies remain crucial for maintaining momentum towards achieving these internationalization goals. Moving forward, North Macedonia's alignment with European language policies and the Bologna Process remains essential to enhance its higher education internationalization. Continued promotion of multilingualism and effective implementation of tools like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) will support greater student mobility and academic cooperation (European Higher Education Area, 2023). Lifelong language learning initiatives and digital innovations can equip learners with essential skills to meet the demands of a globalized economy (European Commission, 2016). Further harmonizing national qualifications frameworks will improve degree comparability and graduate employability within Europe (Knight, 2008). These efforts will strengthen North Macedonia's integration into the European Higher Education Area and foster a dynamic, multilingual knowledge society.

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