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## **Macedonian Students: Their Awareness of EU Studies and a Sense of Belonging to EHEA**

**Abstract:** The academic students as future citizens of Europe are the key energy and strength upon which the democratic and civic oriented Europe is based and built, united and enriched through its cultural diversity. The one of the key factors in achieving the idea of “Europe without borders” is fulfilling a joint European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which involves implementing the principles of the Bologna Declaration. That process is unachievable without active student participation and contribution, which implies consistency in their awareness, also it implies the current trends and reforms in higher education and the opportunities for mobility and exchange of ideas and opinions. By preparing a questionnaire, this paper aims to investigate sense of belonging of the Macedonian students to the European Higher Education Area. Students who are still not part of the European Union Member States, are feeling unequal and less aware about the possibilities of studying in other countries. Even though this fact can be an obstacle in the integration process, the research proved that students in the Republic of Macedonia, although not considered to be European citizens, are sharing the European values.

**Keywords:** European Higher Education Area, mobility, equality, awareness, European citizens

### **Placing the issue in the context**

European citizenship is an important element for strengthening and protecting the European integration process. In this direction the European Commission continues to encourage European citizens to have engaged attitude in all segments of the life in their communities. The purpose of such measures is maintaining the active participation in contribution in creating more familiar Europe, a Europe that is democratic and world-oriented, Europe that is united and enriched through its cultural diversity, Europe where its citizenry can evolve.

In this respect, the process of accomplishing of the idea of a “Europe without borders” means active involvement of citizens in the debates and considerations of European values as a basis for the process of developing sense of common European identity and that is of crucial importance. At the same time it implies development of civil engagement in all spheres of social and political life and a support to citizens who are participating in various initiatives in the development of the democracy in the EU. In this regard, the educational system is an important segment in achieving the common objectives.

The Strategy “Europe 2020” as an assignment of the EU sets requirements for finding measures and conditions that will ensure equal rights, prosperity and solidarity among all European citizens. The strategy emphasizes that overcoming differences between the reality of European integration and

people’s perceptions of that integration presumes the European policies to be directed more towards the needs of citizens. The key strengths of these processes in the strategy are identified: creating value by providing knowledge-based growth; building inclusive societies with increased opportunities for people and creating an economy that is competitive, connected and environmental.

In order to build awareness of European citizenship on the importance of these goals the measures are suggested for approaching the results that are derived from the European policies and actions.

Now, Europe in order to get closer to its citizens, is undertaking measures in the direction of providing for the citizens an equal opportunities to acquire knowledge. Starting from the idea of a knowledge-based society as one of the important conditions for growth and development, special attention is paid to the segment of higher education.

The adoption of the Bologna Declaration intents to achieve a common European Higher Education Area where the academic community will be encouraged to have mutual meetings in order to exchange knowledge and experiences thus creating the circumstances where achieved results could be assessed and a capacity for developing relevant opinions and positions will be built regarding those achievements.

On the other hand, a significant section in achieving the established priorities of the European Union is certainly the youth. The Macedonian students are

the future citizens of the European Union and they will have to contribute in building their own future with their creativity, initiative and energy. They see their future in the civil oriented and united Europe. Hence, referring to “Europe without borders” we believe that students and their attitudes are one of the important indicators for the access of the Republic of Macedonia in the European Union, and the higher education is a place where you can measure the level of accomplished reforms. The extent of the reforms undertaken in order to bring Republic of Macedonia in the European Union is measured also under the conquest of common European higher education range.

### **Methodological approach**

The student positions are big factor that has great potential for critical and objective judgment encouraged us to begin by exploring their opinion regarding the degree of success of the efforts that Republic Macedonia is undertaking in the field of higher education. It undoubtedly brings us to the clues which are valid not only for the education but also for the democratic processes in general, the level of competence gained by the educational policy issues and also issues associated with economic progress and so on.

It requires the preparation of a questionnaire designed to answer the question: How many students in the Republic of Macedonia feel equal with their

fellow students from the Member States of the European Union?

To give a real answer, the questionnaire contained three sets of issues.

The first group refers to equality in terms of opportunities for studying abroad. Although the issue of equality can be treated in several aspects, in this research emphasis is placed on the education system where society with knowledge is created and a system of values built. Additional emphasis is given to the second group of questions dedicated to awareness of the methods and opportunities to study in the EU also an opportunity for sharing experiences and gaining insight into the various educational national systems

The third block of questions are corresponding with the goal set in the strategy “Europe 2020” for equality and overcoming the differences. Hence, the survey is supplemented with the questions that go in the direction of observation on student’s opinions on whether they consider themselves as future citizens of the European Union. If we consider the definition that defines identity as a system of shared values, the question what are the common values that the citizens of Europe should have will help us to identify the image that Macedonian students have for the European Union.

Questionnaires were given in March 2012. And 100 students were interviewed at the State University “Goce Delchev”, all between the ages of 19 to 23 years; those students were studying on different faculties in the fields of natural, technical and social

sciences. The survey was conducted electronically through a questionnaire, it consisted of ten questions divided into three groups. All survey papers were answered.

### Results of the survey

With the objective from the obtained answers to conclude an appropriate context on the opinions and observations of the students, we analyzed the obtained results. The survey paid attention to gender: 45 students were females and 55 males. All of the students were of Macedonian ethnic origin and Orthodox religion, with the exception of five who were of Muslim religion (Muslim Macedonians).

The answers to the first set of questions should give us the context on the young students' opinions in terms of the equality in general with their fellow students from the Member States of the European Union, as well as the fairness in opportunities for studying outside of Republic of Macedonia. We were especially interested in the reasons for eventual feeling of inequality. The third issue of the first group was about whether students believe that with Macedonian EU integration there will be positive impact on the opportunities for work and study in the EU Member States?

The purpose of the second set of questions was to see the state of awareness of the students in terms of opportunities and ways to study in the EU, also about the various ways of collecting information about the

universities in the EU Member States and whether they think that the media in Macedonia has a sufficient number of information - news, shows etc- which will inform the students about the ways and opportunities on studying in the EU.

The third group of questions was designed to examine whether the students consider themselves as future citizens of Europe, and according to them which are the common values of the citizens whether or not they currently see themselves as European citizens?

Thus, the purpose of the survey is not to comment on the answers of the students in terms of their accuracy and precision, but to present the reflection and attitudes of Macedonian students in terms of questions.

### The equality

On the asked question: ***Do you feel equal to your fellow students from the Member States of the European Union in terms of opportunities for studying outside of your country***, 46 students gave a positive response and 54 students gave negative answer. As a reason for not feeling equal with the students from EU Member States, inter alia, students state:

- \* *Students from EU member states have no restrictions on their freedoms and rights;*
- \* *They have better conditions for studying and have no restrictions;*

- \* *We are facing financial constraints;*
  - \* *They have better living conditions and have better conditions for traveling;*
  - \* *Students who are studying in the Member States of the European Union have a better chance of employment and they have better and positive teacher-student relationship;*
  - \* *Are more likely to work in EU countries;*
  - \* *Students who are studying in EU countries have more opportunities to take scholarships;*
  - \* *Studying abroad, in one of the EU Member States, is a difficult step for Macedonian students. We must have to wait for international scholarships in order to be able to study abroad and those scholarships are very infrequent and are not offering security for every student;*
  - \* *Unlike our fellow students from the EU Member States we do not have the opportunity to study outside the country, it is too expensive for us, and scholarships for it in a small number. Also a small number of student participate in students exchange programs with other countries;*
  - \* *EU students have more privileges than us, they receive scholarships to study and have more opportunities for employment;*
  - \* *Students from the EU Member States have a far better treatment in terms of the awarded scholarships, in terms of paying the cost of housing and student life;*
  - \* *We are not in the same situation and we do not have the same opportunities, for us is much harder to get a scholarship for studying in any EU Member State, there are a small number of scholarships offered, and self-financing is very expensive given our standard;*
  - \* *EU Students receive scholarships from the funds of the European Union, and in our country these funds are minimal and almost don't exist;*
  - \* *Because higher education in most of the Member States of the European Union is free;*
  - \* *Our economic situation is very different from the situation that our fellow students who are citizens of EU Member States have. If in the future Republic of Macedonia becomes an EU member then I can say that I am equal in terms of opportunities, because hopefully then we will have open borders and a better economic situation;*
- In addition to financial constraints, the students as a reason for the feeling of inequality are indicating the conditions for studying, the treatment of teachers and the state of them:
- \* *Students from other countries have more opportunities and government supports them in terms of financial resources;*
  - \* *They are more respected by teachers, have more understanding and better communication with them;*
  - \* *Because our country fails to implement the same educational policies as a the European Union;*
  - \* *We are not equal because other countries allow free studies for their students in our country; on the contrary it's not the case for our students when they study abroad;*

- \* *Students from abroad have many more opportunities to study and prove their abilities;*
- \* *Due to the lack of engagement by universities in our country, I think fellow students from EU member states are much more engaged by their faculties;*
- \* *Because we do not have the conditions for studying that our colleagues from the EU Member States have;*
- \* *Because they have better conditions for studying and they are Europeans;*
- \* *Because we are still not treated as a member of the EU and do not have the same rights as students from EU member states. They have more opportunities and are recognized, while we can hardly achieve that level and to study outside of our country;*
- \* *Students in Europe have many benefits and rights during their studying, while here, at our universities the boarding rights are not protected;*
- \* *Students from the EU have a great advantage over us. Their degree is recognized around the world which unfortunately is not the case with our degree. According to this, the hiring prospects of these students are much higher than ours.*
- \* *To study the European way does not necessarily mean that only Macedonia and Macedonian universities should accept some new principles of education, for example, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Between our educational system here in Macedonia and the education in any other EU Member State there is a very big difference, so we can not speak of equality;*

- \* *We do not have the same opportunities.*

The analysis of the responses shows that the highest percentage of students believe that inequality is seen in various educational policies (the absence is opportunity for scholarships) and uneven economic situation (the lack of is sufficient funds to study abroad). Apart from these two dominant reasons the reasons that are also cited are: the lack of student rights and freedoms that is deteriorating the student-teacher relationship, and some of them are also indicating the worsening quality of the educational system in Macedonia in comparison with the education in the European Union (lack of conditions to emphasize quality, the formal reforms outdated curricula, unrecognized diplomas etc.).

Considering the question: ***Do you think that with the entry of the Republic of Macedonia in the EU you will have more opportunities to work and study in the EU Member States***, the majority of students, 92 respondents answered positively. Moreover, some of them explained that with the accession of Macedonia to the European Union that will not only provide them better opportunities and better conditions of work and study, but only then they will get a sense of equality with their fellow students from EU member states.

### **Awareness**

The next group of questions was designed to outline the situation in terms of awareness of the

students for ways and opportunities to study in the EU Member States.

According to the responses received, it can be concluded that the students in the Republic of Macedonia are not informed or, in smaller numbers, are partially aware about opportunities of studying in the EU. Specifically, the question ***Do you think you are sufficiently informed about opportunities of studying in the EU***, 78 students responded “no,” 18 “partly” and only four had a positive answer

Most of the information students obtain by themselves via internet, from websites of the European institutions or from the websites of the universities in the EU. To a certain degree they are notified via website of the Ministry of Education and Science concerning the announcements on scholarships for studying in some of the EU Member States. But, as the students added to their answers, even then, the information provided is for the possibility of a scholarship, while more detailed information regarding the universities, curricula, student lifestyle, the students must obtain that info by themselves through the websites of universities or faculties which are located in the countries that set the scholarship in the first place.

Almost all the students are pointing out that they would like to be more aware about the universities, about the methods and the possibilities to study in the EU. In one of the answers, which we set aside, was said: *“Every day, on TV stations we can see*

*ads for our state and private universities, and we are familiar and fully acquainted with those universities. For EU universities we know very little, there are no advertisements, we can't feel the atmosphere about how it feels to be out there, what students life looks like, what are the types of lectures, trainings, and perhaps therefore to us it all seems distant and unknown. About everything we can learn directly from universities and their websites, but it is not enough.* “

Related to this next question asks, ***Do you think that the media in Macedonia contain enough information - informative news shows etc, that are informing you about the ways and opportunities to study in the EU***, most of the students responded negatively (90), only two answered positive and eight answered “partially”.

Undoubtedly, students in the Republic of Macedonia are missing a lot more information for the ways, and opportunities for studying in EU Member States.

### ***Citizens of Europe***

On the question: ***Do you consider yourselves future citizens of the European Union***, the majority of students respondents (84) answered positively. According to them, the common values that should be shared by European citizens are:

- *Free travel;*
- *Better organized life;*
- *Economic cooperation;*

- *Highly developed awareness of ecology;*
  - *Market oriented economy, democracy and human rights;*
  - *Higher salaries and a higher standard;*
  - *More jobs and better livelihoods;*
  - *Better communication and sharing of ideas and opinions, a greater level of awareness;*
  - *No visa requirement;*
  - *Legal compliance and a higher level of human rights protection;*
  - *Peace, prosperity, greater democracy and freedom;*
  - *Better future;*
  - *Modern way of thinking;*
  - *European citizenship, European anthem, European flag;*
  - *Coexistence and cooperation;*
  - *Opportunity for the citizens to cooperate and participate in the creation of the united Europe, establishing a European identity based on familiar common values, history and culture, strengthening the mutual understanding between European citizens;*
  - *The rule of law, respect for human life, human rights, individual freedoms, equality, solidarity;*
  - *Support of others, tolerance, communication, self-realization, respect for other cultures,*
  - *Solidarity, mutual assistance and the same rights and obligations from all citizens to the Union;*
  - *Freedom of movement across Europe, freedom of choice;*
  - *Higher living standards, equality, freedom of expression, integrity, prosperity and much better opportunities for employment and studying;*
  - *Higher level of education and a diploma that will be recognized in the whole world;*
  - *Tolerance, love, humanity;*
  - *Guaranteed future for young people;*
  - *The possibility of studying in any EU country.*
- With regard to the question: ***Do you currently feel as European citizens***, 42 students responded positively, and 57 students have answered negatively. The reasons for their negative response, students, among other things, note the following:
- *Countries that are not EU members have a different treatment in EU;*
  - *Because of the unprincipled policy towards the Republic of Macedonia;*
  - *We are not sufficiently aware of all the EU affairs;*
  - *Because our fellow students have a lot more information and opportunities for work and study;*
  - *The salaries in Europe are not the same as the salaries in Macedonia, universities are not the same as Macedonian universities, and the economy is different;*
  - *First of all, because after graduation of the possibilities for employment in EU are excellent;*
  - *Because the government doesn't offer opportunities for employment after graduation.*
  - *Because in Macedonia there are simply no conditions for the citizens to feel that they live in*

- Europe. In Macedonia, life is expensive, wages are too low, there is no jobs for young people, too many young graduates are sitting at home, and behind every recruitment there is too much politics;*
- *Because we have a much lower standard of employment and small chances of employment unlike our peers who live in the EU;*
  - *Because in our country the students future it's been reduced to policy (if you are the member of the current political party then you have greater chances of employment);*
  - *Can a man feel like a part of something if he actually is not part of that?*
  - *No, because in some way we are discriminated against in the European Union, although geographically we belong to Europe, most of the major member states of the European Union discriminate us as if we are outsiders despite the fact that we are all equal between each other;*
  - *Because we do not have the same opportunities for employment;*
  - *Because we do not have the same rights, our fellow students from the EU have a lot more rights than us;*
  - *The European Commission still deeply offends the feelings of Macedonian citizens due to the naming of language and ethnicity, which are issues of respect for basic human rights and human dignity. On the other hand, our country still haven't done sufficient range of political reforms in order to fulfill the EU's accession criteria and standards;*
- *There is no high level of democracy and freedom of expression. Also in economic terms, we still don't feel like a European citizens!*
  - *Because we do not live quality life as Europeans;*
  - *Because our country does not have such living conditions as the Member States of the European Union;*
  - *Because we do not have same mentality as European citizens;*
  - *How could people who belong to a country with such a low standard of living be considered citizens of Europe? Europe is so far away from us;*
  - *Because our country still doesn't work according to European standards and criteria;*
  - *As knowledge has not been fully appreciated and students have no employment opportunities even though they completed a university degree and now are graduates;*
  - *As we still don't have the same rights as EU citizens do, in terms of studying and in terms of employment;*
  - *There are many reasons, but I as a student would emphasize more on education that is lacking in many things to match the European education;*
  - *Because my country doesn't, allow me open borders to other countries contrary to our fellow students who are citizens of EU Member States.*
- The answers to some degree are defeating, because they suggest that this young population - students who are future driving force of every country - carry a great sense of dissatisfaction in terms of living

conditions, study, standard of living and employment opportunities in their own country, but also there is a dose of disappointment with the attitude of the EU institutions towards the RM. What is positive is their optimism and their desire to achieve higher degree of democracy and raise the quality of life according with the standards and criteria of Europe. The sum of all their responses suggests their expectations and desire for faster EU integration for Macedonia and becoming part of the great European family.

### **Conclusion**

According to the the results from this research it can be concluded that:

- students in the Republic of Macedonia still lack a sense of equality with the students in the Member States of the European Union in terms of opportunities to study and their future employment;
- students are insufficiently informed and do not have enough information about universities in European Union Member States, they are not aware of the way the studying is conducted and are not aware of the possibilities for studying at these universities;
- most of the students find information on studying abroad by themselves, via Internet, from websites of the European institutions and EU universities web sites;
- students need better information from media in Republic of Macedonia to increase awareness on the opportunities for studying.

- currently only small number of students feel as citizens of Europe, but almost all the students see themselves as future citizens of Europe.

One of the priorities of the European Union is the creating a common higher education area, and in accordance with the principles of Bologna, ensuring mobility of students and professors and exchange of knowledge and experiences. Thus it is obvious there is a need of taking initiatives and activities, primarily by scholars and professors to bring this higher education area to students in the Republic of Macedonia, intensification of information about the colleges and universities in the EU, as well increasing awareness about the possibilities and ways to study in EU. That could be done by organizing relevant debates, round tables, info-days by the Delegation of the European Commission in the Republic of Macedonia as well as by producing and broadcasting the appropriate educational programs in the electronic media in Macedonia which will include informative educational content about the ways of studying in the EU. Of course, all of this in terms of raising the level of student sense of equality in our country with the students in the European Union. Because, according to the received responses it can be concluded that the sense of inequality in many of the received responses is due to insufficient or incorrect awareness of the Macedonian students on the opportunities to study and work in EU Member States.

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### **Online resources:**

Europe 2020 Strategy

Available from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>

European Commission – Citizenship

Available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/index_en.htm)

The Education, Audiovisual and Culture Agency Executive Agency (EACEA): Europe for Citizens Programme

Available from: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/citizenship/index\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/citizenship/index_en.php)

Communication of the European Union with the European Citizens

Available from: <http://www.euprera.org/?p=75>

European Year of Citizens 2013

Available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/european-year-of-citizens-2013/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/european-year-of-citizens-2013/index_en.htm)

**Сузана Џамтоска - Здравковска**

## Македонските студенти и нивната информираност, рамноправност и чувство на граѓани на Европа

**Резиме:** Студентите, како идни академски граѓани на Европа, се клучната енергија и сила врз која се темели и се гради демократска и граѓански ориентирана Европа, обединета и збогатена преку својата културна разноликост. Како еден од клучните фактори во остварувањето на идејата за „Европа без граници“ е реализација на заеднички европски високообразовен простор кој подразбира и имплементирање на принципите на Болоњската декларација. Тој процес е неостварлив без активно учество и придонес на студентите, што пак подразбира постојаност во нивното информирање, како за современите трендови и реформи во високото образование, така и за можностите за мобилност и размена на идеи и мислења. Преку изготвување на анкетен прашалник, трудот има за цел да го испита чувството на припадност на македонските студенти кон европскиот образовен простор. Студентите кои сè уште не се дел од земјите-членки на Европската унија, се чувствуваат нерамноправни и помалку информирани за можностите за студирање во други земји. И покрај тоа што овој факт може да претставува пречка во интегративните процеси, истражувањето покажа дека студентите во Република Македонија, иако не се сметаат за граѓани на Европа, ги споделуваат европските вредности.

**Клучни зборови:** европски простор на високо образование, мобилност, рамноправност, информираност, граѓани на Европа.