# E-participation and Innovations for European Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract.** Agenda Europe 2020 is emphasizing the role of the education for the competitiveness and innovativeness of Europe. The important aspect of such development is further enhancement of the Bologna process based on the broader participation of all stakeholders of HEI (Higher education institutions). MyUniversity project funded by 7th framework program of European Union develops and uses the e-participation tools for United European Higher Education in 14 European Universities. The project represents the innovative activity in the area of HEI. In the proposed paper we discuss the usefulness of such tools as follows: discussions, polls, processes, e-petitions, e-consultation for the better decision making processes in HEI. We are critically evaluating the attained outcomes and draw the lessons from so far realized research activities, which may be further developed

**Keywords:** MyUniversity project, e-paticipation, European higher education

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The electronic participation plays only a limited role in European universities at present, however it is expected that this will change in near future, at it will be more important for European policy making. European Council and Commission have presented strategy EUROPE 2020. It is the European Union's ten-year growth strategy. It is about more than just overcoming the crisis which continues to afflict many of our economies. It is about addressing the shortcomings of our growth model and creating the conditions for a different type of growth that is smarter, more sustainable and more inclusive. (European Commision, 2010) Seven initiatives (flagship initiatives) are incorporated on that global strategy. One of the most important is the "Digital agenda for Europe". The Digital Agenda for Europe aims to reboot Europe's economy and help Europe's citizens and businesses to get the most out of digital technologies. (European Commision, 2012)

## 2 EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

By identifying human capital development as fundamental to smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth, the Europe 2020 strategy places education and research at the center of Europe's future economic well-being. Consequently, it opens up a wealth of opportunities for higher education institutions (HEIs), who have a key role in providing teaching, undertaking research and innovation, producing employable graduates, and developing new ideas for a changing world. (European Commision, 2010) Digital agenda for Europe document is quite comprehensive and addresses multiple views on information and communication (ICT) challenges for the next years. It is based on seven pillars which includes 101 actions. The expected advantage and the added value of agenda are the interconnection of ICT aspects with benefits for humans, citizens and Europe as well. It can be found in the pillar "ICT-enabled

benefits for EU society" of agenda. Digital technologies have enormous potential to benefit our everyday lives and tackle social challenges. (European Commision, 2011)

## 2.1 Bologna process

The Bologna declaration was signed in the year 1999 and the resulting Bologna Process was started. An important characteristic of the Bologna Process – and key to its success – is the close cooperation between governments, higher education institutions, students, staff, employers and quality assurance agencies, supported by the relevant international organizations. Contrary to most people's beliefs, the Bologna process is not a European Union initiative, but an intergovernmental process with 46 participating countries. Obviously this goes beyond the borders of the EU since it has 27 member states. Six primary objectives are included in this process:

1. adoption of the system easily understandable and comparable diplomas,
2. adoption of a system based on two cycles of study (currently has a three-stage),
3. adoption of the credit system (ECTS),
4. improvement of the mobility,
5. improvement of European cooperation in quality assurance,
6. strengthening the European dimension in higher education.

## 2.2 MyUniversity project

One of the key success aspect of Bologna Process and the creation of unified European Higher Education Area is the close cooperation and interaction among governments, higher education institutions, students, staff, employers and quality assurance agencies. However, in practice, this is hard to achieve and the process lacks the active participation of a large number of students and university stakeholders.

For this purpose MyUniversity project equip universities with a cutting edge e-Participation platform which give them the means to reach out to all of their members and stakeholders, informing them of the issues under debate and providing them with innovative interactive tools so they can actively participate in the process. Thus providing the higher education decision making process with valuable input towards future polices and legislation. MyUniversity is the project of the EU Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Policy Support Programme of the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP)-(CIP-ICT PSP-2009-3bis) solved by consortium of European universities and institutions Duration of the project: 33 months (October 2010 - June 2013) The project has begun on October 1, 2010.

## 3 E-PARTICIPATION TOOLS

MyUniversity software platform is based on the Gov2DemoSS platform (informative and collaborative civic engagement platform that provides an efficient channel for governments and, alternately community groups, to keep their constituents informed, manage their information repositories, enable transactions and gauge public opinion). The Gov2DemoSS platform has been implemented using open source components. The core of the platform is the CMS Joomla, with additional modules to support Multilanguage, forums, blogs, surveys, agendas, news articles and search engine functionalities. The implementation of Gov2DemoSS has been based on the use of open source components with proven solvency within the IT community (LAMP architecture), without the use of any commercial products. During the pilot of this project there have been used a few e-participation methods (represented by software modules). It is necessary to divide them to groups from a political and from a communication aspect.
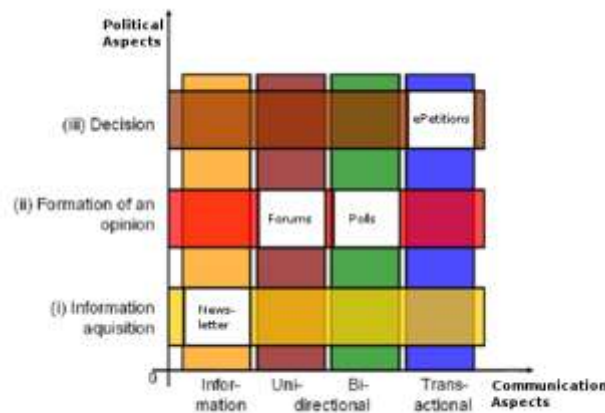
Fig. 1. MyUniversity's matrix of e-participation instruments

First group of modules includes tools only for reading official information without any interaction from readers.

**Newsletter** – The platform allows sending newsletters to all registered users on their e-mail address. Additionally, these newsletters can also available on MyUniversity websites for the broad public.

Second group of the modules are represented by modules for formation of an opinion which can be uni- or bi- directional (from communication way aspect).

**Forums** are very powerful tools in a participation environment, if used correctly. They allow the users to engage the students, academics, teachers on issues that are important to them and receive a wide range of opinions that can be taken into account in local university decision making.

**Polls** - This module can be configured to support different polls with different options (real time results, private, single vote, multichoice pool...)

The most sophisticated and also the most empowering tools are in the "decision group", where can users by bi-directional operations directly participate on decision making processes.

**ePetitions** allow users to address a petition signed by multiple citizens (i.e., website users) to a local official. This module provides valuable input for the decision making processes as it helps to identify the issues that are important to their citizens (students, academics).

## 4 RESULTS

The real usage of the platform on our university (Slovak university of technology in Bratislava) was between October 2011 and April 2013 – 19 months. During that pilot phase of the project trial management team have published 18 electronic initiatives. We can evaluate these initiatives from three perspectives / attributes.

    A) Attribute of the **"Topic type"**

        I.)        ***"MyUniversity"*** - Topics related to Trial portal or MyUniversity platform (e.g. Portal usability, and Participatory Design of new topics, user engagement).

II.)    *"University Life"* - Topics related to the life in the university ecosystem (e.g. dormitories; canteen; ecological policies; renewable energy sources and premises).

III.)    *"Higher Education local matters"* - Topics related to higher education within the University (e.g. PhD. studies; professional status; university visibility abroad; assessment methods implemented in the university; education quality; traditional books vs. electronic student books; university information system; scientific-research scheme and students learning expectations).

IV.)    *"National Higher Education"* - topics related to higher education at regional or national level (e.g. exams related policies and reform of higher education).

V.)    **"Bologna process"** - topics related to the bologna process (e.g. qualifications framework/degree structures; mobility; employability; student centered learning; education, research and innovation); European mobility programs (e.g. ERASMUS experience, ERASMUS benefits).
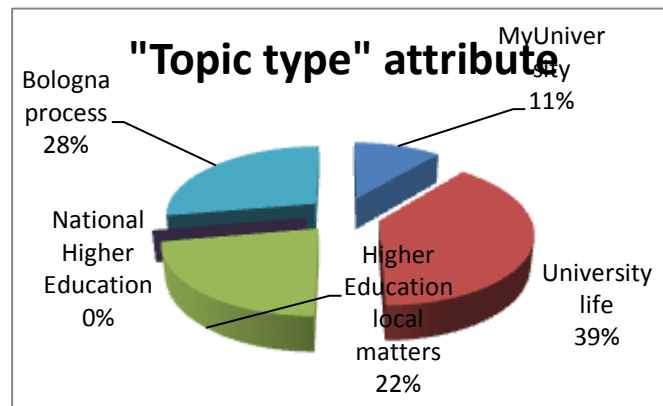


Fig. 2. Percentage share of MyUniversity e-participation initiatives based on "topic type" perspective

B) Attribute of the **"Engagement Level"**

I.)    *"Information"* - Sharing information in a one-way relationship aiming at providing the target participants with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and opportunities and/or solutions.

II.)    *"Consultation"* – Two-way relationship aiming at collecting the target participants' opinion on identified issues. The goal is to obtain feedback, including views of citizens or communities on policies, programs or services that affect them directly or in which they may have a significant interest, in order to ensure to ensure that the expressed concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

III.)    *"Collaboration"* – Partnerships with the decision maker in which the target participants actively engage in the policy making process, in order to ensure that their concerns are understood and considered. The participants are involved in the development of alternatives and selection of the most appropriate solution.

IV.)    *"Empowerment"* – The participatory process is a decision making process in which the participants will be responsible for the decision. Sharing the power and responsibility between the government and participants, in the

selection of the final decision in the policy making process, empowering the target participants to identify their needs, plan action, manage projects and evaluate the results of their activities.
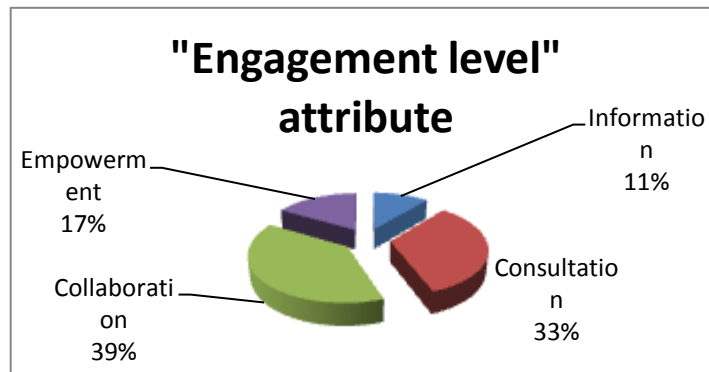


Fig. 3. Percentage share of MyUniversity e-participation initiatives based on "engagement level" perspective

C) Attribute of the **"Achieved Outcome"**

    I.)    *"Not relevant"* - It was not possible to obtain any relevant outcome (e.g. reduced level of participation).

    II.)    *"Improved access to relevant content"* - Participants had access to relevant background material made available or to relevant content generated by the received contributions, improving the target participants' knowledge on the addressed topic.

    III.)    *"Feedback on current status and available options"* - It was possible to generate relevant and representative feedback concerning the status of the addressed policy, procedure or situation.

    IV.)    *"Creation of collaborative input to decision-making"* - Generation of contributions that have effectively influenced decision making on the addressed topic.

    V.)    *"Decision-making"* - Participants took part of the decision making process.
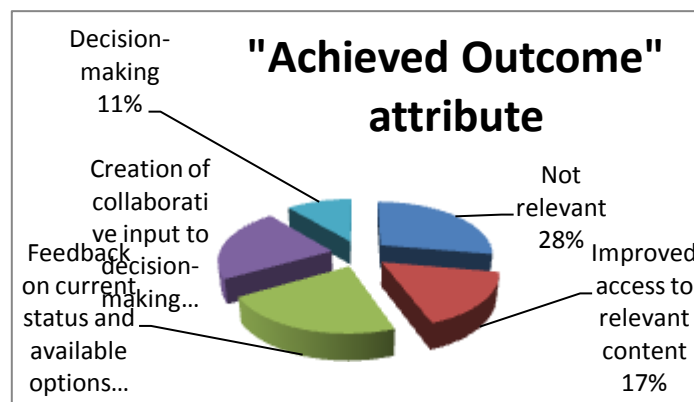


Fig. 4. Percentage share of MyUniversity e-participation initiatives based on "achieved level" perspective

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The applied methods and tools of MyUniversity enabled the project team members to test the participatory electronic framework for discussing the problems of educational policies in HEI in the framework of Bologna processes, with potential impact on Higher Education Institutions, as well as, on broader society. One of the goals of the project was to create the links among the different e-participation forums, discussions, polls and the decisions of responsible people in the University. We were able to inform the decision makers about the opinions of the participating people, yet it was quite difficult to evaluate the impact of this information on the real decision making processes. The ideal situation would be the engagement of decision makers directly the electronic discussions, but as our experience has shown, such an engagement was unfortunately rare.

This happens probably because the university officials have quite the broad agenda, not having much time to be engaged in such discussions, and moreover most of them are not used to act in such a way. It is also true that most of the older teachers usually use the social networks as the TWITTER and Facebook in a very limited scale. They are trying to minimize the time devoted to these networks, since often contain lot of spam and they are often very time demanding. This is why some of the highly productive researchers almost do not use such networks. Secondly, participants in electronic forums do not often represent the collective views of the most important stakeholders of the University. This is because the e-participation in forums does not have mass character. Only a small number of Internet users take part in electronic debates and so the pluralism of ideas is necessarily restricted. Moreover as our older research from the urban planning research shows, the level of the participation in Eastern Europe is generally lower than in the Western Europe (Smutny et al. 2004).

E-Participation initiatives may not be successful if the technological platform does not work very well or is not as attractive in comparison other well developed social network platform. The rapid development of ICT is the source of problems for older e-participation platforms since the users are getting accustomed to state-of-art software and they may criticize the older platforms and may be less willing to use them. To some extent we experienced this problem with the MyUniversity platform. However we have found that the core challenges of e-participation are on the social side. Moreover the successful implementation of e-participation includes the contributions from political science, public administration, sociology, information systems, and more.

Norwegian researchers correctly point out that the Internet (and e-participation methods) largely serves to activate people who are already politically active. (Saglie, J., Signy, I. 2009) It is thus quite difficult to activate the academics and students that did not actively participate in Bologna process discussions before. The problem of our so far realized research was that we have concentrated our effort on the use of „ready to go techniques", and only later we realized the complexity and broad scope of the activities that are going on in HEI. Furthermore the e-participation in Bologna process may be more successful when we will better understand the real needs and preferences of the participants and the stakeholders. According to (Øystein S. et al., 2011) the stakeholders are often treated as the homogenous entities often resulting in oversight of key interests.

Participation is a characteristic of the active citizen who provides input into policy-making. In this respect, the authorities should provide channels for potential participants to present their ideas and, even more importantly, listen to what is said. One of the most frequent reasons for not participating listed by young people is the feeling that nobody is listening. (Livingstone 2006).

Our experience from e-participation shows that there should be much stronger interaction with decision making structures of the University. That according to our opinion means

providing more information from the university decision making bodies to the potential participants in the discussions before the decision is made. It is necessary to embed the e-participation processes into the decision-making structures and the decision makers should provide the feedback to participants. To find the optimal ways how to do it is, however, not easy and such innovation may be resented. There may be the several reasons for that, such as additional time resources that are necessary for dealing with the results of the e-participation, conservativeness of the decision-making bodies, feeling that more transparency can endanger the interest of the peer groups that are following their interests, etc. Thus such changes are necessarily linked to the changes of the participation culture in the universities, which needs more research, and necessarily the transformation of existing organization culture.

On general the e-participation discussions related to Bologna process brought some results although more was expected. Probable reason for that is the fact that predominant approach to implementation of Bologna process was top-down. The Education Ministries has defined the guidelines that have to be followed by the universities, providing them the limited time for their implementation. Usually the management of the faculties demanded the staff to quickly implement partial solution, while they often have not been aware of the "full picture", which rather the domain of members of the narrow expert groups and few managers. Naturally such approach provided the limited space for the broad participation of the stakeholders.

Thus the innovation in the orientation of the Universities toward Bologna process was so far mostly top-down driven by obligatory guidelines, which however do not enable to understand the Bologna process as the whole, but they are rather oriented on the technical aspects of its implementation. The discussions on Bologna process in the Europe and the opposing opinions were not really welcomed in past. The realization of the Bologna process had its peculiarities especially in the countries influenced by the Humboldt education system, which continues also nowadays. This means that the realization of the Bologna process may be quite different in the specific cultural context and historical legacy, such as legacy of education system of Eastern Europe. Thus the practical implementation problems of the Bologna concept require higher involvement of the educators as well as the students. The development of e-participation techniques and their use in the Higher education institutions as the component of the European digital agenda has the potential to contribute to higher quality of the Common European Education area.

## Acknowledgments

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