

PUBLIC POLICIES AND LEGISLATION IN EDUCATION

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SUMMARY

The objective of the study in this paper will be the main issues regarding frequent changes of policies in higher education in Macedonia. Recently, there have been intensive activities in relation to the tertiary education and this has initiated a number of debates, which the government calls intentions for increasing the quality in higher education. But, there have been various different reactions from universities some of which even identify these attempts with the aims of the government to actually control the higher education area, when it is supposed to be independent as stated in the constitution. Therefore, one might get the impression that through public policies a gap between public and private educational institutions is created, though both are of a public interest. Is it possible to increase the quality in higher education by just modifying the laws in conditions when public criticism on education is being suffocated? Are the educational inspectors and threats by issuing fines a warranty for quality or evaluation and self-evaluation processes?

Policies that favor urban schools on one hand and disperse universities through provinces on the other without ensuring real working conditions, do not support civic perspectives. These are also problems for social justice and socio-economic development in the future.

Can laws and public policies be obstacles for ensuring quality in higher education? Can universities pursue European educational trends when the state allocates that little budget means for education and scientific research? These are some of the issues that will be addressed in this paper through statistical data analyses, public policy analyses, interviews and direct observations.

Keywords: Legislation, public policy, budget, quality in education, public, private, evaluation

1. THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In recent years in Macedonia there has been an increased, even accelerated engagement in order to improve the quality of higher education. However, there are a series of problems that are being debated in the political and academic circles.

The first issue has to deal with the fact whether the government should be the leader in promoting the idea of quality improvement in higher education through public policies in education or should the universities themselves work hard in this respect since it is an issue with crucial importance for the future of higher education.

The second point is to see whether these kinds of initiatives should be first debated in the broad scientific opinion before they become normative acts within laws and then be explained to the academic circles by telling them that this is very beneficial for you and as such it has proved to be successful here and there.

The third item has to do with the modification and amendment of laws in higher education. The new Law on Higher Education adopted on 01.01.2008 has undergone a series of amendments so far (9 times it was brought before the MPs in order to be amended and

supplemented) in exactly those segments that were previously mentioned and which were not able to resist the academic practice.

It is widely known and scientific research has proved the same that universities should meet several criteria that have been verified and are in compliance with international standards and agreements initiated and supported by highly-developed western industrial societies. The specifics of higher education consists of the fact that it prepares cadres of vital interest for the future development of a community; doctors, leaders, engineers, lawyers, economists, IT specialists, linguists...

The education is becoming a priority issue for almost all societies. In socialism one could not discuss about assuring quality in higher education. It was an unknown phenomenon. However, another concerning issue that is increasingly drawing attention is the funding of higher education. The debates related to the existence of public and private universities go in this direction. The European experience points at the fact that if universities manage to have external financing sources, they can become more autonomous. However, in order to define this concept more concretely in our context, we have to say that the problem with the higher education in Macedonia started to be debated in 1997 as a result of the EU initiatives for the transformation of higher education systems in post-socialist countries. The Agency for Higher Education Evaluation was established by the law of 2000. The quality can be seen in the efficiency of the institution, the level of education of the population, the number of graduates and their degrees, the position of graduates in the labor market, scientific acknowledgments of teachers and professors, etc. Scientific research of higher standards and the number of graduates is a signal of quality, too. They possess intellectual skills through which they can materialize their ideas and turn them into resources; that is called power, says Max Weber (2006). These intellectuals represent the core of the progress of society. In Macedonia the need for higher education qualifications is increasing. However, a large number of graduates find work abroad. Today, the knowledge in the field of IT, foreign languages, and the university qualification, of course, are very certain arguments for obtaining stay and work permits in western countries. About 60 – 80% of those that gain key positions in different sectors, such as courts of law, universities, public services, military, churches, etc., have been educated in Oxford or Cambridge or other private educational institutions.

2. PRIVATE AND PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

In Macedonia the number of students applying in higher education institutions is gradually increasing and the first private universities, especially the Southeast European University was the most meritorious for this. We can now speak of a liberal approach for all interested in higher education. When talking about private universities, the question is related to money and quality. Can quality be transformed into money? At first sight, that is true. However, when analyzing more thoroughly the whole situation, it seems that quality is a product of more complex factors, among which money is, too. In conditions of globalization, countries face with alternative solutions and dilemmas and if they do not react on time, it may become too late. Namely, the liberalization of enrollment procedures ruined the admission criteria and the monopoly positions that universities had. Governments should allocate funds for higher education in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching. Even though the private higher education in Macedonia is a public interest, the state only supports financially public-state universities. This has been proved on several occasions when there have been public statements that only public-state universities will be financially supported by the government – pretty threatening statements that are usually politically motivated. The whole process of the transformation of higher education will be meaningful if the graduates from those institutions prove to have become innovative, inventive, skillful and capable of meeting the labor market requirements and competition. This means that the future university graduates should not

expect to be employed by the state; moreover, they should be able to find a job by themselves. This is what the quality of higher education in western countries means and as such it represents a new impulse in the post-modern era. The duty of the state is to offer maximal alternative solutions and free access, i.e. equal opportunities, rule of law and space for study, research and business. Should we, as parents, teachers, professors and politicians think about the future of our children? Under the current circumstances, we can conclude that there is a negative selection in schools, in leading positions in society, in state administration, and everywhere else. We should establish new situations in which knowledge and wisdom will be the main moral value. We all know that people, i.e. teachers, assistants, administrators, deans, etc., are the driving force in a faculty or department. The university can have a name to be seen and heard, but if there are still people whose emails are not functional or they do not know how to use them, then they automatically depend on someone else's help in order to write and send a message. In Europe and America what is legitimate is the quality of services only and it is directly in function the transformation of the educational system. We have to clarify the weaknesses in the transformation process of our universities and human resources in them.

3. UNIVERSITIES AND POSTMODERNISM

If we refer to Raschke, (2012) *Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University* she states that "In recent years, the powerful social, cultural and economic changes wrought by digital technology have led many to forecast the end of the university as we know it". This book employs extensive research and case studies to explain why these predictions, even if perhaps somewhat premature, are on solid ground.

Below the same author speaks about the role of the digital revolution and the time of postmodern university which has in essence changed things and which moves quickly forward so that we are obligated to follow it if we'd like to be part of the game. ... "how the internet, high-speed electronic communications and personal computers necessitate a radical rethinking of what is meant by 'higher education'". The book calls into question both the traditionalist's skepticism about the benefits of new technology, and the corporate e-learning advocate's failure to grasp that education is more than what happens on a computer screen. This is an essential read for anyone concerned about the future of higher education. This is post-modernism as the main element of globalization in education.

On the other hand, Drucker (1995) says that today knowledge has become a dominant economic resource. In fact, knowledge is represented as the only meaningful resource. Traditional resources such as soil, other natural resources, workforce, and capital will not disappear but they will become trivial, or secondary. All this is sometimes encompassed within the notion of post-modernism itself. Daniel Bell in the USA and Alain Touraine in France (*Bell, 1873, Touraine, 1974, Giddens, 2009*) used the notion of post-modernism. But, now this is the society of the future, the digital society, the society of micro-processors. The mode of production of material goods based on factories, machines, physical engagement is moving to another direction where information and services are becoming the core of production (Drucker, 1995).

4. EDUCATION POLICIES AND NEW MAs and MScs

In recent years there is an increasing trend of MAs and MScs. For your information, in 2003 there were only 63 masters whereas last year this number was 1,568 (www.stat.gov.mk). This means that the number of masters has increased for 20% per year. In 2012, 1,568 people obtained their master's degree, in 2011 – 1,297. Today, there is overproduction in terms of higher education personnel and this in turn has caused higher numbers of unemployed but qualified people, who keep looking for jobs through the employment agency. According to some experts, this is not only due to the ECTS system which is already being implemented by

certain higher education institutions, but it is also a result of public policies which are currently being applied in education.

A record number of 692 masters were recorded as unemployed at the Employment Agency. Even 20,669 others are unemployed who are university graduates, and except them, 16 PhDs wait for work. This is far from the last report of the Employment Agency in October, which reflects the situation of unemployed by the level of education.

The number of people with college degrees who wait for work is continuously increasing, whereas the most numerous are those who have completed legal and economic sciences. (*Nova Makedonija*, 29.11.2012.)

5. A LOT OF UNIVERSITIES AND STUD PROGRAMMS

Another problem is the *politization* of universities. They have become, in a way, centers of political ideologies and employment industries for politician's children as well as for the employee's children. On the other hand, the dispersion of universities in provinces had a negative impact in the quality of higher education. The University of Tetova which started functioning illegally in 1994, at times when there were no proper conditions or sufficiently-qualified cadres was legalized in 2004. However, instead of creating genuine working conditions, it began with the political process of dispersion of its units in small settlements with less than 10,000 inhabitants. The same was done by the newly established Shtip University. Even the Saints Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, as one of the oldest and strongest universities in the country ensnared itself in the political hook. Some private universities became governmental spokespersons by supporting the taxation battles of the government; this happened one a rector of a private university stated that he was paying the required taxes to the government and the owner of the A1 media house was not. This is just a tiny fragment of the miserable situation of educational policies in our country.

Table 1: Masters of science according to the scientific field of the master's thesis, sex and age

| | Total | | Age groups | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | All | Female | Up to 29 | 30-34 | 35-39 | 40 + |
| Total | Total | 719 | 667 | 229 | 158 | 243 |
| Natural sciences and mathematics | 99 | 56 | 58 | 15 | 14 | 12 |
| Technical-technological sciences | 196 | 63 | 85 | 31 | 29 | 51 |
| Medical sciences | 11 | 11 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Biotechnical sciences | 53 | 20 | 22 | 7 | 6 | 18 |
| Social sciences | 778 | 486 | 436 | 137 | 89 | 116 |
| Humanities | 160 | 83 | 60 | 37 | 18 | 45 |

Source: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/>

From the table it can be concluded that more social science 778 masters are produced, then 196 masters from technico-technological sciences, 160 from the human sciences and only 11 masters from the medical sciences.

6. REFORMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA AS A RESULT OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESSES

Today, in 2011, Bologna tries to give life to the maximum pan-European educational space where students can take wide and transparent courses with high quality, accessible and procedures for obtaining relief on their knowledge. Liberalization of enrollment in

Macedonia, especially in the study year 2010/2011 ruined previous criteria wiped of enrollment and balanced positions between public and private universities. The government did almost free registration at public universities, thus causing damage to private universities and causing competition. Macedonia became a member of the Bologna Process in 2003, whereas with the changes in the the higher education system started since 1999. In this regard, a Law on Higher Education and the reforms that followed forced the university to begin with the affirmation of lifelong learning, the implementation of ECTS, Bologna study programs, universities integrated using IT systems in three cycles, implementation of concept of learning outcomes, the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, joint degrees, student and teacher mobility, etc. internal and external evaluation. (National Programme ..., 2006:250-262)

Government of the Republic of Macedonia for a long time develops a pro-education media campaign under the slogan "Knowledge is strength, knowledge is power." Marketing governor spoke to university information, the web-learning, to call tech, for dispersion, but the reality speaks that these towns were formally added with Faculties, without a real academic staff, thus in many faculties exams are organized in commercial buildings, elementary schools, in "Artisan homes" etc.

Other changes occurred in the Law on Higher Education regarding the accreditation and evaluation, which created confusion in academic circles. University professors in Skopje took the initiative to go to protests on the streets to protect the autonomy and dignity of the profession of the university research worker. The idea of these changes in the law was to apply the so-called accepted European standards. These standards implemented by the European Association for the Evaluation of Higher Education (ENQA-European Network for Quality Assurance) and others.

This evaluation is done by committees from certain areas by at least three professors from universities recognized internationally. In the current laws on Higher Education of 2000 and 2008 evaluation and accreditation have been as separated processes. There was Accreditation Board and Evaluation Agency. While Accreditation Board functioned in line permanently, evaluation Agency was working intermittently. The latter, as was sometimes the case between 2004-2007 not held any meetings.

With the new law of 11 February 2011, was formed a joint Board for Evaluation and Accreditation to establish a system of assessing the quality of higher education. This system provides:

- a. Assessment to high quality education, leadership, funding, and academic activities.
- b. Approval, certification, acceptance of academic institutions, their programs, their accreditation study.
- c. Self-evaluation and external evaluation.¹ According to the decree of the Government of norms and standards for the establishment and institutions operation of higher education (Official Gazette, no. 168 of 24.12.2010): *In the existing institutions of higher education study programs that deliver third cycle studies / doctoral mentor must have: during the year 2010, at least two papers published in the peer reviewed international journals in the appropriate fields; during the last five years at least a participation in international meetings; From 1 January 2011, at least three papers published with peer-review in international scientific journals, relevant to the field during the last five years at least two participations at international meetings, and from January 2012, 4 publications and 2 participations in international scientific meetings are required. From 2015 scientific publications in international journals with impact factor are required.*

¹ Exactly the external evaluation was an apple of discord between the Minister of Education and universities. A number of university senates rejected the new law changes and especially the external evaluation stating that it violates the autonomy of the university. (Dnevnik, 17.02.2011).

Other changes have to do with the criteria for the realization of the third study cycle. (Official Gazette of R.M..2011)

But if we refer to the following text we will see that here in comparison with Macedonia, we have a big problem. While Europe maintains proper high autonomy for institutions of higher education, in Macedonia it fell short of what was in socialism, even the government policies narrow the education constantly. Government communicates with universities through inspection.

Despite a general trend for increasing school autonomy in Europe, there are still significant differences between countries. Whilst around a third of countries grant a high degree of autonomy to schools for managing financial and human resources Autonomy is more likely to be given to schools in some areas than in others.

7. CONCLUSION

Higher Education in the Republic of Macedonia needs more work for the establishment of quality. Honoring laws alone does not ensure quality education, but these changes need a broad dialogue in the scientific and academic sphere, and then these discourses to turn into laws. So, university should change, the government can foster them, but as it is now, should impose changes. The same is true for public policy in education. Private universities are for the public interest and the state must support them. If declared openly and indirectly through inspectors makes pressure to the private institutions, then this is a serious problem of access to the new system of education. Public universities do not have to covet the unconditional dispersion, dispersion as social policy issues that students should study in their towns; instead they should support mobility as a unique European environmental value of education.

The Future of Universities and higher education in Macedonia should be viewed by all as the obligation to increase its quality and access to equal opportunities for all participants within institution, but also before government and community.

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