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The need to improve the educational process in high education institutions in the Republic of Macedonia by applying management methods and techniques

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Abstract

This paper is focused on practical explanation of the implications from the introduction of the Bologna Declaration principles in the high education system in Republic of Macedonia as a comparative analysis between the quality of work of the state and private high education institutions in the country. This problem was analysed from two aspects: theoretical and practical, incorporating the analysis of the students' and teachers' attitudes. The purpose of this paper is to detect some fundamental changes within the educational frame initiated by the seemingly "superficial" Bologna reform.

Hereinafter the outcomes arising as a result of the "inside look" will be exposed, i.e. consider the academic environment as a relatively autonomous entity. The analysis does not exhaust the elements of comparison, but opens questions and offers recommendations that are expected to be further processed. The intention is to cause an incentive for continuous evaluation in order to improve the quality of high education in Republic of Macedonia.

Key words: Bologna Declaration, reform, education system, high education in Republic of Macedonia.

1. Introduction

The high education is an integral and conjoined part of each country's development. It is not only the most powerful drive determining the socio-economic development internally, but also a quality that a country uses to legitimize itself externally [1]. The countries' political and economic globalization, primarily the European ones, implies the need for educational globalization as the essence

of their sustainability [2]. The question of continuous high educational development is not a matter of good faith, but an obligation from which fulfilment it depends whether the country will be in the role of an inert or active participant in the processes of globalization [3, 4]. The global architecture triggered a pronounced need for accelerated transformation of the overall high education structure in Republic of Macedonia and establishing its quality appropriate to the needs of the country [5].

During the last decade of the last century and the beginning of this century the education system in Republic of Macedonia is facing a multitude of innovations, caused by changes in the environment. On one hand, there was a profound change in the social order, and on the other hand, technological developments underwent expansion. Such trends are partly dictated by the accelerated globalization in the economic sphere, i.e. the movement of goods, capital and people across national borders. The public universities in the past were representing quality and meeting the labour market needs through the high education staff. Today, globalization as a process and the introduction of free education market led to the creation of privately hold high education institutions. At the same time, the state-owned high education institutions were conditioned to transform their placement to date and to develop a new organizational structure that will meet all requirements and needs of the labour market, which are constantly changing.

The National Programme for the Development of Education in Macedonia [5] expresses the desire of the state to make changes in the education system that will enable compatibility of the study programs, identification and recognition of the

qualifications acquired at all levels of education in the European educational space and greater employability skills for the European labour market.

The key to success for these reforms is characterized by innovations in teaching as well as by developing and implementing new methods of learning. These learning systems need to be agile because of the constant changes in the environment and lifestyle. It is these moments that initiate the need for a full review and radical reform in the high education system in Macedonia, as a condition for successful training of students for the jobs in the labour market.

2. Globalization in Education – Implications from the Bologna Declaration

At the meetings in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and Berg (2005) various decisions in communications' form, which represent an addition to the Bologna Declaration [1], were adopted - Prague Communiqué, Berlin Communiqué, Berg Communiqué.

Conflicting views about the possible implications of these reform initiatives occurred among the protagonists who had an active role in the transformation of the education system and the participants who think theoretically. On the one hand there is the view that the Bologna Declaration and the Bologna process represent a "product" of the European universities themselves. They simply represent recognition of the need to change the university, to adapt to the new economic, social and ethical paradigms of the XXI century. The adjustment is not a simple response to the needs and demands of the society, but it represents a way for the university to influence the relations between elements in modern days [1].

On the other side, there are scholars who see the Bologna Declaration as purely political instrument and consider that behind the whole project there is a predominant political initiative, rather than a desire for fundamental connection and cooperation.

The transformation of the education systems in most European countries has seen a lot of progress, while in some countries such as the Republic of Macedonia it is at its beginnings.

2.1. The education and reform tendencies in it in the Republic of Macedonia

Ever since the beginning of this problem, there is a question on the relationship between the social reform and the reform in the educational system. In the Republic of Macedonia one may notice a tendency to neglect the educational reform in comparison to the economic and the political system reforms. This tendency is somewhat expected if considering the fact that these kinds of reforms and radical changes are interconnected and conditioned. The ultimate result of the economic and wider social reform success is extremely problematic without making a quality reform in the educational system. Therefore, when radical changes occur, as of changes of structural character in the global social system it is needed to accommodate such changes in the subsystem - education, if the system is intended to take place. This dependence of the educational system as a subsystem of the global social system today is raised in the contemporary sociology of the education.

If we consider these assumptions, then the question is: why Macedonia has no clear conception of the reform, the changes in the educational system, or conception of changes which is not exhausted with the so called reintroduction of grammar schools in secondary education, as well as with certain changes in the curricula, especially in the high education? Why education comes almost at the last place in the social reform? Why adopting such socially important decisions such as reforms, is still based on voluntary basis and improvisation which were typical for the real-socialist system.

The high education over the last twenty years has been subjected to numerous reforms that basically resulted in changing the curricula and educational programs, and introducing "free" admissions. Virtually all applicants which applied at the universities, regardless of their high school success and without any checks were enrolled in the universities in the Republic of Macedonia. Thus a tendency of mass studying emerged. The mass studying and high level of democratization in terms of representation of different social strata at the universities led to a sharp decline in the quality and standards of study and evaluation, as well as poor performance in the studies.

The changes in the high education, particularly with the introduction of tuition fees, or student's payment of funds for their education, as well as with the expansion of the private sector, significantly reduced the pressure to study. At that time it was supposed to consider and primarily resolve the financial problematic for those students who demonstrate above-average success and talent to get exempted from the tuition fees or to be awarded scholarships in the amount that is sufficient to enable their schooling in the high education. Otherwise, strong tendency of negative selection in the high education will appear that will lead to the demise of the national intelligence.

In the high educational changes it is necessary to complete a radical change of the enrolment policy which appears to still prefer the criterion of getting points from high school success and results of the state exam [6]. Such enrolment policy in high education implies endeavour to have an excellent student success (5) on all subjects in secondary school. With great success, but with one or two grades with very good success from unrelated subjects for the chosen study field or university, significantly reduces the chances of success in enrolment. With this deprived enrolment policy, a number of talented students in certain areas and skills fall out for having a very good or good success in unrelated skills. The enrolment policy of universities in the developed countries gives preference to the talented students from the appropriate group subjects from a certain science or group of related sciences and not from all items as is the case with the enrolment policy in Macedonia. Therefore, in the developed countries from this perspective there is a constant positive selection in the education system.

The universities in Macedonia are terribly poorly equipped, not only with technical means, but with the necessary minimum of scientific literature, especially foreign periodicals and other publications. Without overcoming this, of course, it is illusory to insist on quality study. Also, the universities in the country are not functionally related with the economy and are not sufficient generators of new knowledge and technologies, as is the case in developed countries. The new scientific achievements, undeniable technological and structural changes in the production and society have placed a request for a new model of university, with new enrolment policy, a new way of organizing work and a new way of studying and connection with the economy and social activities.

One segment of this paper is devoted to the analysis of the Bologna Declaration and its implications for the educational systems in the Republic of Macedonia.

3. Analysis and evaluation of results

The subject of this research is a comparative analysis of the performance and results of the educational process in the public and private high education institutions in Macedonia.

The aim of the research is to determine the quality and conditions in the public and private high education institutions in the country and to determine the gap between the high education institutions and the economy and their relationship in creating resources for the needs of the labour market. The intent is to encourage continuous comparative evaluation and proposing practices for continuous development and growth of quality in the high education in the country.

Table 1. Display of graduated students in the public and private universities in the period 2005 – 2013

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2013
UKIM (The "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" University)	3980	5006	5224	6145	5259	3898
UGD ("Goce Delčev" University, Štip)	/	/	/	/	274	1145
SUT (State University of Tetova)		/	543	682	436	820
UKLO (The University "St.Kliment Ohridski"-Bitola)	905	1229	1288	1317	1582	1352
The FON University	/	/	135	189	468	357
SEEU (The South East European University)	/	/	285	693	1270	887
UACS (University American College Skopje)	/	/	/	87	/	226

Source: State Statistical Office, 2010

3.1. Analysis of the situation in the high education in the Republic of Macedonia

When it comes to the circumstances and the available facilities in the field of high education in Macedonia, there are five state and twelve private universities available. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia, the total number of graduates in 2013 was 9480, or 7307 at the state universities and 2144 at the private, which unlike in 2012 marked a decreased by 8.8%. From the total number of graduates 82,3% are regular, while 17,7% are part-time students [7], Table 1.

The data presented in Table 1 is based on graduates of undergraduate studies at universities in the Republic of Macedonia in the period from 2005 to 2013. Because of the high rate of unemployment, attending university often represents only a fictitious prospect in the form of temporary exit from unemployment. Before the establishment of private universities, many high school students did not continue their education to college or enrol in the universities where the conditions for entry were not so rigorous.

According to data from the State Statistical Office, the number of graduates at the undergraduate studies at universities increased by 34.6% in 2007 in comparison with 2006. In 2008, this number of graduates increased by 29.6% compared to 2007. The number of graduates at the undergraduate studies in 2009 decreased by 5.6 compared to 2008, and in 2013, this number compared to 2012 decreased by 8.8% [7].

The presence and development of increasingly attractive areas as business, management, marketing, information technology, resulted in the opening of many private colleges with less rigorous selection process which contributed to overabundance at the market with staff from non-commercial areas.

3.2. The competencies of the ideal candidate for the needs of the labour market

When it comes to modern and liberal market, the university degree is not a single element or criterion to get a job. The companies or the employers beside the diploma require other skills such as knowledge, particular skills and personal characteristics that are

essential criteria for a candidate. The large companies recruit their staff through selection and evaluation in order to select the best candidate.

According to data from the Agency for Employment and their analysis, the most important elements when hiring potential employees are: knowledge of the language (English, German, etc.), computer skills, communication skills, organization and readiness for teamwork.

From the analysis of the public job announcement we came to the following results. For less than half (46%) of the positions required in the labour market a criterion for employment knowledge in foreign languages is not stated, while in all other advertisements the necessary knowledge of at least one foreign language is stated. Typically, a sound knowledge of English is required (42% of advertisements), while only 3% of them required the candidate to know at least one more language besides English. Knowing a foreign language is one of the conditions of employment in the 60% of the private and 40% of the public companies [8].

Other important criteria that employers seek from the applicants are work experience and knowledge of computer skills. Not less important are the interpersonal skills as the ability for effective communication and ability to negotiate, which criteria are present in 15% of the total number specified listings, or 25% of the ads in which the required personal characteristics are listed.

When it comes to jobs in finance, economics, and public administration an important characteristic required from the candidates is the ability for teamwork [8].

Interpersonal features are considered very important for the Macedonian companies because they are listed as a prerequisite in the public job announcements in 24% from private companies, 20% from public companies and 44% from non-governmental and international organizations. Here, we should mention the need for analytical and leadership skills of the candidates that are more important and required in 11% of the job announcements from the private companies, while at the state institutions in 1% to 2.7%. Responsibility as a criterion is one of the priority qualifications and more present in the ads from the state institutions (18.6%), and at significantly lower percentage in private companies (6%).

As a result of the analysis of the current state of high education in Macedonia it was concluded that due to the insufficient focus of the educational programs, which are often outdated and difficult to adapt to the modern trends in the industry and the market, many professionals in various sectors, especially in those who tend to develop rapidly, have difficulties in mastering their field of interest. Most of the teaching staff at the state and private universities does not have enough practical experience in the field of their lecturing. The professors' and associates' staff at large number of universities, after completing their education cycle, have no individual practical experience of transferring practical knowledge and experience to the students.

3.3. Rating the quality of high education through the applied methods and techniques in the high educational process

This complex and problematic question depends on many factors. The assessment of the quality of high education is comprised of several elements such as the manner of instruction, methods that are used during the teaching process, methods for assessment of teaching, methods to assess the knowledge, the ratio between the theoretical and practical training, etc. All these elements or indicators were investigated through analysis of curricula, creating focus groups and conducting surveys with the students during the academic year.

3.4. Analysis of the curricula at the high educational institutions

The roads that lead to the acquisition of new skills such as knowledge, skills, abilities, building new attitudes, should be clearly set out in the curriculum. Thus, they would serve as guidelines for the teaching staff regarding the way of teaching and assessment of the achieved results with the students. The clear set of objectives and strategy in the implementation of these serve the students to adapt to studying and always have in mind the competencies to be acquired. Unfortunately, only a fraction of these universities have set specific goals and the same applies to the specific competencies that the students need to learn, which are little represented in the curriculum.

On the other hand, the universities which have set such goals, only partially pay attention to accomplish them, except in the curricula and programs at the university SEEU where methods and results measurement of learning, knowledge and skills were set. In some programs at UKIM goals that are usually at the level of knowledge and analysis are set, but the means of achieving them are still lacking.

Also, the goals for the study program - in Marketing at UKIM these are quite practically set, with emphasis on the application of specific knowledge and skills. However, such goalsetting without beforehand established plan for implementation is not a sufficient prerequisite for teaching in which it is necessary to adopt certain competencies. Also, it is very important to determine whether the objectives and competencies are only formally given or the teaching staff actually implements the methods provided for their achievement.

The analysis of this situation indicates that at the faculties, the focus is still set on memorizing and reproducing the taught material (or the written in textbooks) while the quality of the acquired knowledge expressed through flexibility, dynamics, durability, application, comparability, etc., is marginalized as a process component in teaching.

3.5. Analysis of the attitudes and practices of the teaching staff towards students acquiring competencies

The perceptions of the teaching staff in terms of which skills should the students gain during the study period were analysed from several aspects. Firstly, we analysed the attitudes of the teaching staff in view of the most important skills that the students in high education need to acquire, as well as the ways in which they practice to transfer / shape these skills (through methods of teaching and assessment).

Most of the teaching staff interviewed responded that they seek to bring together the theory, applicability and practice in the teaching process. Some of the most commonly mentioned skills that teachers seek to transfer to the students are: critical thinking; practical implementation of knowledge in real terms; individual and team work; communication skills; basic knowledge of scientific disciplines.

Although almost all members of staff said that it is important for the students to gain specific ap-

plicable knowledge, teaching and orientation towards acquiring theoretical knowledge versus specific skills is still dominant in the teaching methods. Because of the tendency towards application of the Bologna principles, part of the teachers over the last few years are trying to bring changes in their methods, throughout occasional practice of initiating discussions with students, presentations on specific topics by the students and so on. These methods often serve as the basis for defining the part of the assessment based on the activity of the student during class. However, their application is very often formal and comes down to the students teaching part of the textbook. These methods are applicable only to define the final evaluation of the student that must be a result of his activity. However, although this method is acceptable and serves to encourage students to be more interested in the topic and subject of study, it guides them to focus at best only on part of the material. 'Clinical teaching' (lecture by an expert - practitioner of a particular area), and methods of solving problems through simulation of real or fictitious cases are very rarely held, although these methods are considered to be most useful by the students. One of the reasons for the poor application of interactive methods are the large study groups. Particularly worrying is the fact that at some departments (usually in the field of information sciences) the number of students is increasing rapidly in recent years, while the resources of faculty (classrooms, computers, professors) remain the same. This largely prevents interaction during teaching and reduces the possibility of individual approach and "teaching to fit the student".

Some faculties (usually the private) practice occasional visits to the institutions in order for the students to gain insight into the ways of their functioning. This is a good practice that should not be taken formally, but the institutions should offer information to the students who otherwise might not get them at the university. According to the students, these visits are seen as particularly useful, but rarely implemented.

The methods of assessment are largely aligned between different universities and colleges because of the implementation of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which generally involves the evaluation to be de-

rived 70% from concrete subject knowledge, 10% from attendance, 10% from activity in class and 10% from projects (although the teaching staff can make small changes in the ratio of these aspects). However, in accordance with the ways in which it is estimated, each of these aspects can vary significantly. The comments from the students indicate that in most of the courses it is required to reproduce material from the textbooks, whether it is in the form of test or essay questions [8].

Generally, the attitude of most students is that only the most basic things for basic understanding of the matter are learnt. The students from certain departments expressed concern that the matter does not include contemporary topics that will be necessary in practice. Students at FEEIT in UKIM (Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technologies) expressed satisfaction regarding the contemporaneity of knowledge. The students of the Faculty FCSE (Faculty of Computer Science and Engineering) at UKIM said they are generally satisfied from the contemporaneity of learning materials and technical resources available in the department.

Throughout their by-laws, the students are given a formal opportunity to influence the curriculum (changing, updating, etc.) by participating in the educational council, but general conclusion is that there is little or no debate among the students about the curriculum of undergraduate studies. Many of them are not considering the possibility to suggest changes to the program because they think their proposals will be rejected.

3.6. Analysis of the relationship between the high education and the labor market

Commonly in the curriculum the practical instruction is treated as a segment of instruction that should be realized during the exercises. However, often the exercises are not practical, but simply repeating the taught theory. On the other hand, student internship programs are typically not provided as a separate segment of instruction. Besides, where the practice is mandatory, it is not usually controlled by the university, but its performance often remains the sole responsibility of the student. The larger part of the teaching staff believes that there is a good alignment between the theo-

retical and practical work and that most students are sufficiently competitive in the job market. According to their claims, the private universities are more competitive in the field of practical teaching and for them it is a comparative advantage over the state universities. When it comes to the public schools, the students practice represents a “bottleneck” of the teaching that is mainly down to the activities of the exercise on the acquired theoretical knowledge within the department through the work of project tasks, preparation of papers, etc. The common problem of the state and private universities is that none of them has control over the execution of student practice and there is a serious lack of evaluation of these activities. Often, the contents of the log of practical teaching do not undergo any evaluation by the company that conducts the practice nor by the faculty where the student studies.

The teaching staff at “Goce Delcev” University in Shtip critically addresses the activities of the University in the area of linking theoretical and practical training and it has seen results.

At the faculty FCSE at UKIM it is established that the implementation of practical training should be provided using specific equipment in the laboratories, larger student classrooms etc.

Even though the professors at the Institute of Informatics at Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics are mostly satisfied with the terms offered at the faculty, they deem a more channelled enforcement of the professional practice necessary. The students, on the other hand expressed great dissatisfaction from the offered practical work during the studying period, although there are variances depending on the faculty they belong to.

So, students from FON University expressed utmost reliability in terms of their readiness to cope in the labour market because of the good conditions offered at the university and the orientation towards the practical work. However, the dilemmas they mainly have are related to the fact that there is still mistrust and prejudice by the companies towards this private college [8].

The students who conduct internships generally face shortness of time to gain knowledge and skills; insufficient engagement by representatives of the companies; lack of guidance from mentors at the universities; weak interest from the univer-

sities and companies to conclude mutual contracts for practice.

However, the opportunities for practical work largely depend on the openness and cooperation of the institutions and companies. In general, while the private companies are quite open to cooperation with the educational institutions, the public sector is less flexible, which reduces the opportunities for practice for many students (mostly from the social sciences). Most of the interviewed representatives from the companies stress that they offer lots of opportunities for student practice.

Although the companies which have achieved effective communication with the educational institutions are satisfied from the cooperation, there are several detected problems:

- the practical training is not detailed and thoroughly established by law;
- part of the employers are not familiar with the opportunities and benefits of employing students - interns;
- it is usual practice for the students to visit the companies during the summer when the workload is lower, and thus competences that could be earned are reduced;
- a number of companies working with confidential information do not run internships precisely because of safety and confidentiality of the information at their disposal.

4. Conclusion

The need for radical changes in the high education aims for the present and future students to develop their knowledge and skills more closely correlated with the needs of the labour market, but also to increase their mobility ie to allow the acquisition of knowledge and experience at other European universities. The new scientific achievements, undeniable technological and structural changes in the production and in the society place a request for a new model of university management, new enrolment policy, a new way of organizing work, studying and connecting with the economy and social activities [9-11].

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