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MEASURING THE QUALITY OF THE HIGH EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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Abstract

The question of quality of private and public high educational institutions in the Republic of Macedonia is being asked every academic year and results in numerous public debates which very often lead to stereotyping of individual institutions. This paper provides a comparative overview of the situation in the private and public high education system in the country through the analysis of subjective and objective indicators based on which a comparison is made between two types of high education institutions. The instruments used in the comparative analysis of subjective and objective indicators are statistical data, application of the SWOT method for comparative analysis between the units, as well as usage of various methods and techniques to improve the quality of high education. This comparative analysis raises questions and offers recommendations for the potential improvement of the quality of work of these institutions. 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.

Keywords: Bologna Declaration, Reforms, Education System, Higher Education, Republic of Macedonia.

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Introduction

This paper provides a comparative overview of the situation in the private and public high education system in The Republic of Macedonia through the analysis of subjective and objective indicators based on which a comparison is made between two types of high education institutions. The Republic of Macedonia is a developing country that is making efforts to progress through the implementation of the principles of the developed European countries. When it comes to university education, with the introduction of the Bologna Declaration numerous changes took effect, in the normative (Law on Higher Education) as in all other areas of the organization and the performance of the universities (EUA, 2009). These radical changes aimed at current and prospective students to develop their knowledge and skills more closely correlated with the needs of the labor market, but also to increase their mobility, i.e. to allow attainment of knowledge and experience in the other European universities (Bourdieu, 1990).

In the modern era the term expert is synonymous with great connoisseur of his discipline. The conditions of contemporary life and work impose acquisition of numerous skills, as well as their continuous development, so the phrase lifelong learning obtained its own substantial conversion. Universities are not yet a true partner in this regard, so the upgrading of skills is often being overtaken by the companies or institutions in the field of non-formal education.

Education represents training and preparing the student to become a full and useful member of society, so the development of skills is only a part of the educational work (McHenry and Husvik 1997).

The second part refers to the development of the capacity for critical thinking and the ability to produce knowledge workers. In that sense, we should ask the question - how much the initiated changes take into account the essential knowledge and thought nurturing, and if this standardization of the educational process leads to a real connection between the universities across Europe. The lack of debate around the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is particularly visible because the Republic of Macedonia uncritically accepted all proposed reforms, regardless of the possible consequences. Some European countries have already introduced modifications and try to adapt the ECTS to their needs. The introduction of ECTS did not bring mass mobility of teachers and students, in part due to the lack of interest in this practice, and partly due to the large bureaucratic obstacles which confront the candidates.

Analysis and Evaluation of Results

Scope of this research is the work and learning outcomes in the public and private high educational institutions in the Republic of Macedonia. The aim of the research is to determine the quality and conditions in the public and private high educational institutions through a comparative analysis. The analysis encompasses the teaching methods, flexibility of the curriculum, the professionalism in the teaching and associates staff, the control and quality of the educational process, as well as in the duration of the study, the relationship teacher – student, and book collections in the library. This comparative analysis raises questions and offers recommendations for potential improvement of the quality of education in the higher educational services. The intent is to encourage continuous comparative evaluation and to propose practices for continuous development and growth of quality in the high education in the Republic of Macedonia.

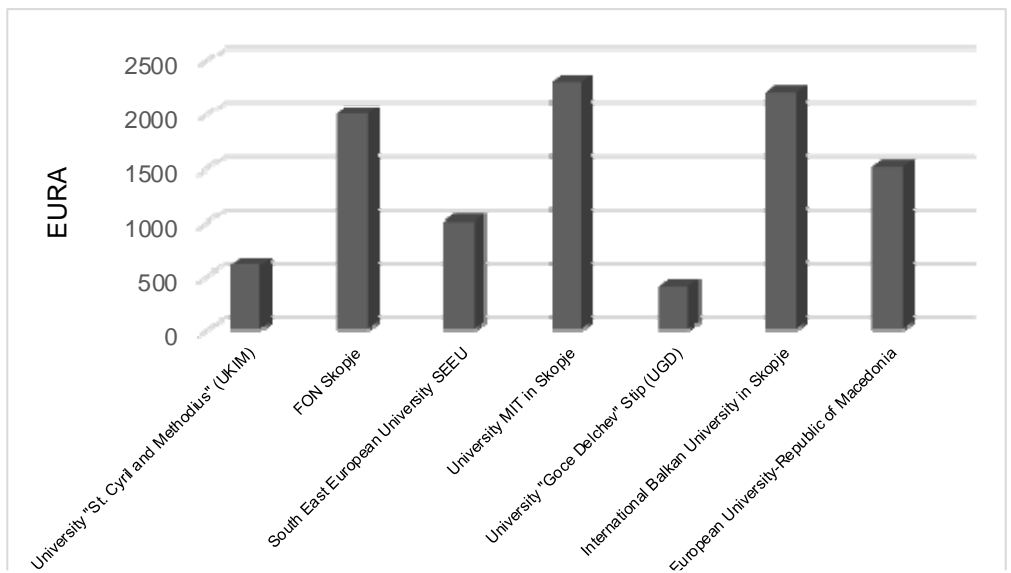
In Macedonia there are five public universities: University "St. Cyril and Methodius" (UKIM), University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (UKLO) in Bitola, State University of Tetovo (SUT), University "St. Paul" in Ohrid, University "Goce Delchev" Stip (UGD). There are many private universities and colleges too: Private University FON Skopje, New York University, American College in Skopje, International Balkan University in Skopje, University MIT in Skopje, University of Tourism and Management in Skopje, Integrated University NEOCOM Skopje, International University Skopje, University of Audio Visual Arts, European film Academy ESRA Paris-Skopje, Euro College in Kumanovo, and Business Academy Smilevski Skopje.

The changes in the high education, particularly with the introduction of tuition fees or payment of money from the students for their education, as well as the expansion of the private sector, certainly and significantly reduced the pressure and interest in studying at the universities. However, the issue for those students who demonstrate above-average success and talent to get rid of participation in tuition, or to be awarded scholarships in the amount that is sufficient to enable their education in high education, should be taken into consideration and fundamentally resolved. Otherwise, strong tendency for negative selection in the higher education will develop that will lead to the demise of national intelligence.

Analysis in terms of Tuition Fees in Higher Education Universities

The scholarships for the private universities are ranging from 900 to 3,000 EUR, depending on the policy of the university and the individual departments within it. Typically, the registration fees at the Technical Universities are higher. The tuition at the public universities is quite variable with regard to the type of study (state quota or with co-financing) and the type of faculty. The lowest cost for studying in a state quota at the public universities is 100 EUR, while the highest is 400 EUR. Studying with co-financing is lowest at the School of Philosophy (250 EUR), while it is highest at the Medical Schools (1,200 EUR at UKIM and 1,000 EUR at the Tetovo University) as well as at the Colleges of Security, Financial Control, Faculty of Tourism in Ohrid and Police Academy in Skopje (1,000 EUR). In addition to these formal charges, each faculty has its own list of additional costs for students, such as student newspaper, union, parliament, attorney, sports and cultural activities, library usage, index, uniforms etc. Thus, the costs of studying grow from 50 to 500 EUR (Center for research and policy making, 2010), Figure 1.

Figure 1: Schematic representation of tuition expressed in EUR at the private and public universities in the Republic of Macedonia



Source: Center for research and policy making, 2010

To determine the quality of the high education in the Republic of Macedonia, we used a methodology based on a combination of objective and subjective indicators to show different aspects that affect the quality of education in the private and state universities. The following subjective indicators were taken: teaching methods; flexibility of the curriculum; the level of professionalism of the teaching staff and the management and control of the quality of high education services. Whereas, the objective indicators used: duration of the study; the relationship staff - student; available library collections; the number of courses in the curricula.

Due to the differences between the universities and individual colleges in view of conducting databases, it is difficult to come to this data particularly from the state universities. The data used are taken from the analysis of the Statistics Bureau, data from the Center for Research and Policy Making own analysis, analysis of the official documents of the universities and faculties, as well as from close contact with the staff and students. All these indicators are examined by conducting interviews and focus groups including students and teachers from both private universities FON and SEEU and the two state universities UGD and UKIM (Center for Research and Policy Making, 2010).

One of the indicators for assessing the quality of the high education is the time of study at high education institutions.

In the period before the implementation of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) about 20% of students graduated on schedule, while data on the introduction of ECTS shows that this percentage significantly increased afterwards. In 2007, 30% of the students graduated on schedule, while an increase of 37% of graduates in 2008 was noticed. It can be concluded that with the implementation of ECTS the time of the study is reduced, while the quality of education is increasing, see Table 1.

Table 1: Average duration of studying at the public and private universities in the Republic of Macedonia

	FACULTY OF LAW	FACULTY OF ECONOMICS	FEIT	NATURAL SCIENCES AND MATHEMATICS FACULTY	FACULTY OF MECHANICAL ENGINEERING	FACULTY OF TECHNOLOGY	FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE	TOTAL
UKIM		4,9**	4,2** 6,5***	6-7**	6,5**	6**	7,5**	5,9**
UGD								5,2**
FON	4,5*							4,5*
SEEU								/

Legend: * 6 semesters; ** 8 semesters; *** 9 semesters

As for the private universities and the introduction of ECTS, the duration of studies and the percentage of repeated academic years are decreasing. From Table 1 it can be seen that the average length of study at the public universities is about 1-1.5 years longer than the typical time of study at the private universities. It can be concluded that the duration of the studies is the longest at UKIM, and within the University itself there are big differences between the faculties.

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of high education was performed is the ratio of teaching body – student. In order to successfully implement the teaching lessons an important factor is the interaction between the students and the teaching staff, which relationship is best displayed through numbers. The most optimal ratio in terms of the number of students and teachers is one professor against 10-45 students. For example, in Germany this ratio is 1:15, Italy - 1:44, Poland - 1:33 (Center for research and policy making, 2010).

When it comes to these factors at the universities in the Republic of Macedonia, the following results were obtained based on data from the Statistical Office, see Table 2.

Table 2: Ratio of teaching staff – student

Private Universities			
JME	EURM	FON	UACS
1:39	1:16	1:20	1:6
1:20			

Public Universities			
UKIM	UGD	UKLO	SUT
1:20	1:20	1:32	1:17
1:22			

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia

From these figures it can be concluded that there are significant differences between individual faculties, at the expense of the general differences between the public and private universities.

Although the quantitative data (Table 2) shows that the Macedonian universities (public and private) have sufficient teaching staff, this data can not speak in favor of the regular maintenance of teaching, as well as the conditions and quality of the same (Center for research and policy making, 2010).

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of higher education was performed is the book fund in the libraries in the high education institutions. The available reading resources in the libraries is also one of the indicators of the quality of teaching because of the assumption of necessity and variety of literature, in order for the students to master the most important trends in their study. An average stock of books in the libraries at the following Universities is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Book holdings in the libraries at the public and private universities in Macedonia

	UKIM	UGD	SUT	UKLO	SEEU	FON	UACS
Total books	600.000	20.000	18.000	500.000	33.000	10.000	2.000

Source: Center for research and policy making, 2010

Table 3 indicates that the oldest public universities have the largest book holdings (fund) within their libraries. This information is to be expected, considering the decades of enriching the library fund within the previous social system.

Besides the size of the library holdings, the accessibility, availability, quality, subscription, modernity, and electronic access to various publications have also been evaluated. The fact that the students, in addition to general literature, use very little from the available library resources, is disappointing. Could the issue of decreasing students' interest to use the library lie in the style of running these institutions? Is it a result of the enlarged use of modern technologies that allows access to the desired literature at any place and time?

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of high education was performed is the course choice available in the teaching curricula. As for the diversity in the curricula offering, the analysis of state and private universities showed significant differences. Being the oldest university, UKIM has the largest selection of faculties and study programs, which means a large number of areas that can be studied and researched. When it comes to the private universities, a great limitation in terms of the choice of scientific disciplines appears.

If a comparison is being made between the state university UGD and the private universities FON and SEEU in the matter of the curriculum in the legal studies, it can be seen that UGD offers more than 40 courses that are not represented in both private universities. From the perspective of the economic studies, the situation is even more drastic, because the state university UGD covers additional 50 different courses which are not offered in the private universities FON and SEEU curricula. However, it should be noted that sometimes these study courses are not realized due to low student interest towards particular subjects.

In choosing a university, the students are often guided by the wide range of areas of study it provides, which creates a perception of high quality. Nevertheless, the ranking and reputation of the state universities (according to the Shanghai list), along with the lower tuition, also influence the final choice of the students (Center for research and policy making, 2010).

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of high education was performed is the application of teaching methods in the educational process. Today's modern education systems are focused on classes in which the student is at the center of the teaching process. It means abandoning the traditional teaching methods with which the Professor creates and transmits the learning material. The students in this case are required to follow and reproduce the presented material. The introduction of ECTS should mean significantly increasing the interactivity of teaching. At the state universities, interactive classes started to be applied with the introduction of ECTS. Its implementation is still performing slowly for the simple reason that many decades classical teaching practices are well groomed. As for the private universities, ECTS is being much better implemented as they develop it from the moment of its inception. However, despite the efforts to modernize the teaching methods, the interviews with the students indicated that both private and public universities still give primacy to frontal teaching.

As to the nature of the interactive classes, it usually manifests itself through presentations of seminar papers, lecturing material segments, discussions, debates, analysis of the problems through which critical thinking among the students' needs to be developed, as well as practical application of the previously acquired knowledge through various simulations of the given area. A positive fact is that both, the state and private universities, have a particular teaching staff (mostly junior professors and assistants) who often prefer the method of interactivity on their lectures and exercises.

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of high education was performed is the flexibility of the curriculum in the high education institutions. The students in the private universities mainly feel that there is more freedom to express their opinions around the curriculum. However, some students said that although their proposals are generally welcomed, what is lacking is their implementation.

The state of the public universities, according to statements from the students, is different. The students are quite reserved in terms of their

capacity to initiate and cause changes in the curricula. Most of them do not even try to offer suggestions because of the opinion that they will neither be considered nor adopted.

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of high education was performed is the extent of the teachers' professionalism. The human capital refers to the teaching staff, who needs continuous education and trainings and whose opportunities for professional development are extremely important for the quality of teaching. In this segment we observed differences between the universities in terms of available time and resources for the professional development of the teaching staff (participation in conferences, seminars, research).

Although FON University affirmatively aims for professional development of the teaching staff, employees themselves consider their options limited because of the large personal commitment to the institution, as well as the lack of financial support. In the other colleges and universities the teaching staff expressed relative satisfaction when it comes to opportunities for professional development. In general, the barriers to implementation of this development are related to the financial support of the universities or faculties and the Ministry of Education and Science.

A criterion on which the assessment of the quality of high education was performed is the assessment of high education management and quality control of the educational service. The continuous evaluation and quality control of the high education service is an essential tool for achieving and maintaining the quality of high education. Equally important and vital are the external assessments of the education quality performed by independent institutions - European University Association (EUA). While the state universities (UKIM and UGD) are regularly subject to external evaluation, the effects of the internal evaluation are rather not felt. The universities appear to lack internal evaluation by the students in terms of the educational process that would help enrich the teaching process at the university / faculty (from teachers to the administrative staff). Another important disadvantage is the incomplete system for analyzing data which reduces the opportunities for strategic planning of the activities based on the analysis of the real situation, with the exception of the State University UGD (Center for research and policy making, 2010).

As for the private universities, they practice model of integrated university, where all data are received and processed in a system which facilitates control of the quality of education. These systems are quite

rigorous when it comes to the control the quality of teaching and the teaching staff. However, the expertise of independent experts who would objectively analyze the quality of the education process is necessary. So far only SEEU submitted an application and received two professional external evaluations by (EUA). Based on the research, SWOT analysis on the public and private universities in terms of their strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats in relation to the implementation of the education process was conducted, which analysis will help in providing guidance to enhance their business processes, Table 3.

Table 3: SWOT analysis of the public and private universities in the Republic of Macedonia

Strengths		Weaknesses	
Public	Private	Public	Private
Long tradition of providing high education; Selection of departments / faculties that are not available at the private universities; Larger variety of subjects/courses; Long-standing research activity; Enrolled students with relevant pre-knowledge; Great enthusiasm for studying; Available scholarships for students in the state quota; Developed graduate (especially doctoral) studies.	Selection of interdisciplinary study areas; Tendency for recruitment of academic staff who graduated abroad; Contacts with the labor market (Career Centers, etc.); Contemporary environment for study; Emphasis on practical classes (visits to institutions and companies); Organizing many extracurricular activities (forums, conferences, seminars) within the university.	Lack of flexibility in the curriculum; Still dominant parian attitude in the academic staff; The relatively high tuition fees for students who are not in the state quota; Weak involvement of students in research work; Uneven student interest for various study programs; Lack of availability of the teaching and administrative staff to the students; Lack of involvement of the students in the decision-making.	Lack of adequate teaching staff; Excessive focus on promoting technical and spatial conditions versus academic; The curricula that have been taken from other institutions are underdeveloped or inconvenient; Somewhat closely focused curricula (specialist); Sometimes perceived as private companies by the public; Weak choice of elective courses.

Opportunities		Threats	
Public Maintaining a good reputation in the labor market; Maintaining a solid reputation among foreign high education institutions; Giving the opportunity to study to the high caliber students with unfavorable socio-economic position; Activating the research potential of the teaching staff; Opening of new positions for young teachers' staff.	Private Flexibility in terms of the possibility of adjusting the curriculum; Possibility to obtain licenses from foreign universities; Sufficient funds for the provision of modern conditions for study (ICT equipment, foreign lecturers); Increasing number of people who are willing to pay for high education.	Public Slow adaptability to the conditions in the labor market; Outflow of the students and staff to the private universities; Insufficient use of teachers' potential; Weak autonomy in decision-making: financial instability; A big load of students; Weak cooperation link between the teaching staff and the students.	Private Lack of trust in the quality of education by the general public; Registration of students with poorer high school success; Relatively high fees; Lack of confidence of the labor market representatives regarding the qualifications of the graduates; Doubts about low criteria in terms of level of the students' knowledge.

Application of some tools and techniques for improving the education process in the high education institutions. The analysis in this paper shows that many college curricula do not have clear goals in the teachings and in the competencies that the students should gain, nor defined strategies for achieving the predetermined goals. In the absence of clear guidelines in the implementation of teaching, and teachers' attitudes and intentions towards training students with transferable skills needed in the labor market, leaves teaching to be realized through individual ability, motivation and creativity of the professor.

To overcome these shortcomings, the following is recommended:

- to include the concept of "outcomes / results of teaching" in the curriculum with a focus on developing practical skills and critical thinking among the students. More attention should be attributed to "what the student should show"; instead of "what the student knows";
- to include modern teaching methods and techniques in the teaching process, as well as other forms of assessment in order to reach the objectives of the course, and thereby to develop practical skills in the students. These methods and techniques are: discussions, simulations, group work, etc.;
- students' encouragement for greater use of modern foreign literature;
- to introduce the application of IT tools and other features such as blogs, encyclopedias, and official statistics in the process of teaching and learning;
- to establish standards for evaluation criteria of practical teaching/training in order to give more importance to this segment in the development of the skills of the students;
- to involve people from the business community and experts from relevant fields for the enrichment of the curriculum;
- to establish mechanisms for continuous review of the curriculum by teachers, students and practitioners;
- to practice visits to relevant institutions as part of the exercises and reporting on the effects of the visit.

Given that changing the curriculum is quite rigidly regulated by the Law on High Education, more flexible mechanisms to amend the program and so comply with the changes and trends in the labor market are necessary. It could be regulated at the level of authority of the educational institution, in which members of relevant government institutions and representatives of relevant sectors of the labor market can participate.

It can be concluded that most of the teaching staff is aware of the necessity of creating skills among students corresponding to the labor market needs because one of their main objectives in teaching is gaining applicable skills and knowledge. However, these views are not fully reflected in the practices of teaching and assessment, as realistically they are a typically based on memorizing and reproducing the material.

In order to overcome this situation it is recommended:

- training of university staff to apply modern methods in teaching and assessment, in order to develop critical thinking skills in the students;
- training of the practitioners to apply modern teaching methods, which then would get applied in the teaching process.

Another significant problem is the lack of adequate staff, especially on modern interdisciplinary areas. Much of the potential professors and associate staff leaving for professional advancement abroad are not returning as staff of academic institutions in Macedonia.

Therefore, it is recommended:

- to keep records and register of staff who are educated abroad and continually supplied with information on available jobs that they might apply for in the country;
- to invest efforts to include a larger number of visiting professors from abroad in the areas lacking adequate qualified local staff rather than engaging "habituated teaching staff".

All stakeholders in the education process are unanimous in the view that student practice is one of the most important aspects of a successful transition from the education system to the labor market. A significant proportion of the students are concerned about the lack of opportunities for student practice or because of poor quality performance of the same. Employers on the other side are worried because of the insufficient practical and business skills of the graduates - potential job candidates.

Lately in Macedonia a positive progress in terms of the importance of student internships has been noticed. Among other things, the new Law on High Education in 2010 obliges students to complete a one-month internship program (compulsory for students from each academic year). Although the new legislation is generally positive, care must be taken of the performed practice quality. Otherwise, the lack of willingness of many companies / organizations for cooperation and practical teaching facilitation can cause only formal presentation of practice or giving signatures for completion without real practice to have taken place.

In this paper we provide the following recommendations:

- instead of pursuing practical teaching program each student year, it would be better when it is focused upon and realized in the last two years of the study, but for a longer timeframe and combined with a mentoring program;
- adoption of law on the practical work. The legislations should assume mandatory signing of internship legal contracts, governing the rights and obligations between the trainees / students and employers;
- greater appreciation of the practical classes in the evaluation of the student. This could be achieved through:
- obtaining loans under ECTS for student practice;
- reporting on the practical work done by the student and
- assessment of his work by the company.
- submitting analysis of what he learned and how the practical work differs from what is theoretically covered in the studies.
- compulsory internship will provoke the need for career centers within the universities. They should take into account the requirements and qualifications of the students in the selection of practical training. Also, the centers should carry out an audit and monitoring of the lessons and curricula. They should follow the development of the students before and after the graduation and keep records of their success in the labor market, potential problems, challenges met after graduation, etc.;
- establishment of mentoring principle, supervision of the execution of the practical teaching by introducing the interns in the company, guiding, providing feedback information, monitoring of student progress and providing a report to the Dean of the Faculty Administration;
- to provide terms for the realization of the internship throughout the academic year, and not just during the summer when there is less work in the companies.

Conclusion

The Republic of Macedonia is a developing country, but one that invests efforts to advance the educational process through the implementation of the principles of the developed European countries. When it comes to the high education, with the introduction of the Bologna Declaration numerous changes took place, as in the normative (Law on Higher Education), but also in all other areas of the organization and performance of the universities. These radical changes were aimed at the current and future students to develop their knowledge and skills in closer correlation with the needs of the labor market, but also to increase

their mobility, acquisition of knowledge and experience from other European universities. The introduction of ECTS did not bring mass mobility of teachers and students, in part due to the lack of interest in this practice, and partly due to large bureaucratic obstacles which confront the candidates.

The new scientific achievements, apparent technological and structural changes in the production processes and the society, set requirements for new models of university management, new enrollment policy, a new way of organizing work, studying, and of connection with the economy and social activities.

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