

Internationalization of higher education in Albania - Dilemmas and challenges: Albanian public and private universities in the new globalization era

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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education in Albania

Internationalization of higher education in Albania although an emerging necessity is still in very low figures not only as a connection between institutions but even as mobility between students. This paper sheds lights on internationalization at the regional and at the global level. It analyzes how the globalization and European integration processes are affecting public and private higher education institutions in Albania, their study programs and universities internal management structures. Firstly, it examines the overall changes in the Albanian HE sector since the beginning of 1990s. Then it explores the differences in internationalization between public and private universities and the ultimate changes on the Albanian labor market. My main thesis is that Albanian HE institutions increasingly need to put more efforts to internationalize their internal management structures and to put in practice international study programs. The paper analyzes more the advantages of the international study programs and the difficulties in a development country like Albania to implement them. The paper is based on the case study of the European University of Tirana and explores the difficulties of the faculties of this university to find financial support for international programs, research and travelling abroad, to develop courses with one international perspective, support for its students to study abroad, support to students from other countries and on other indicators such as grants, contracts and linkages in international areas. However the paper deals also with the academic requirements the issue of quality of universities in general. At the end the paper makes a prognosis of some strategies and gives some recommendations how to integrate the Albanian higher education institutions at a regional or global level.

Keywords: Internationalization, Higher Education, Albania, Students mobility, Partnerships, Grants.

1. Introduction

Twenty years after the communist collapse, the Albanian Higher Education continues to suffer some of the consequences of the centralized and public education system of the past. On the other hand, new trends like the internationalization of higher education in Albania although an emerging necessity is still in very low figures not only as a connection between institutions but even as mobility between students. According to the official sources of the Albanian Ministry of Education and Science the Higher Education today in Albania is offered by 13 public universities and 38 private universities with a total of students 61 832 full - time students¹ but very few of these institutions have developed the internationalization of their study programs. The main aim of this paper is to analyze how globalization and European integration processes are affecting public and private higher education institutions in Albania, their study programs and universities internal management structures.

Firstly I will examine the overall changes in the Albanian Higher Education sector since the beginning of 1990s. Then I will explore the differences in internationalization between public and private universities and the ultimate changes on the Albanian labor market. My main thesis is that Albanian Higher Education institutions increasingly need to put more efforts to internationalize their internal management structures and to put in practice international study programs. The paper analyzes more the advantages of the international study programs and the difficulties in a development country like Albania to implement them. The paper is based on the case study of the European University of Tirana and explores the difficulties of the faculties of this university to find financial support for international programs, research and travelling abroad, to develop courses with one international perspective, support for its students to study abroad, support to students from other countries and on other indicators such as grants, contracts and linkages in international areas. However the paper deals also with the academic requirements the issue of quality of universities in general.

2. Internationalization of the Albanian public and private universities

Though external factors through globalization processes are increasing their influence on national contexts, still 'most universities operate primarily in their own national space and context and are part of the educational system within their own country'². This is mostly the case of Albanian higher education institutions the activity of which is regulated under the Law on Higher Education

¹ Ministry of Education and Science of Albania. Official website www.mash.gov.al.

² Maringe, F. and Fosket, N (eds). (2010). Globalization and internationalization in higher education. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. p. 2.

9741 of 21 May 2007, but the situation has evolved with very rapid pace lately, thus there were submitted further amendments to this Law. Public and private Albanian universities base their daily work to various governing bodies and agencies. Some of these important 'check and balance' institutions in the Albanian education system are Council of Higher Education and Science, Accreditation and Quality Evaluation Agency, The Conference of Rectors and other important governmental and non - governmental organizations³. All these institutions are under the competences of the Albanian Ministry of Education and Science which assures the implementation of laws, decisions on legal matters, management and professional supervisions, passing statutes and other provisions. It requires higher education institutions to develop a strategic plan and approve it which should be submitted every five years and also the Ministry of Education and Science requires an annual report from the higher education institutions⁴.

Somehow Albanian public universities with their long experience have been promoters of the political, economic and cultural change at the beginning of 1990s. Although private universities cannot fully compared with them, however their contribution is significant, especially regarding issues of Albanian Higher Education reforms and internationalization of study programs. They have tried to influence the Albanian political thought and government economic procedures to increase the role of universities as a mechanism used by governments to shape social and economic change through scholarships and by offering expertise in education issues. Albanian private university often even have operated also as a lobbying group for the Higher Education financial reform to improve the quality of teaching and research in Albania and they have participated in the national ranking processes.

Even though Albania has not yet been integrated at the European Union and has made little progress at the globalization processes, it still has been affected by these integration concerns. Albanian Higher Education system is a mixture between local and internal strategies of universities, national strategies of the Ministry of Education and Science, European strategies (particularly of Bologna Process) and globalization processes. Thus, in our days the debate is focused on international student mobility, higher education reforms and problems, the role of English language teaching and testing, the commoditization and standardization of Higher Education, partnerships for studying abroad and so on.

Thus, we can see a challenge in all these national structures and even inside the managerial structure of universities. For Williams and Kitaev there are five

³ Law on Higher Education No. 9741 , 21 May 2007 and its amendments.

⁴ European Commission. (2010). Higher education in Albania. National Tempus Office Albania p.3.

main drivers affecting university changes: ideology, expansion, the 'knowledge society', globalization and financial stringency. The pressure on the Albanian universities, both from internal and external factors is very tough and at the same time has become a very competitive system since with visa liberalization its operating in a very open education market. As in many Eastern European countries higher education institutions, Albanian public and private universities find themselves compete with each other for students although in conditions of disparity, since public universities have the financial support of the Albanian government. The competition between private universities is also very harsh and to survive some universities need to have strong government backing and aggressive marketing of popular courses⁵. Furthermore it is important to mention also the brain drain effect on Albanian professors and students which puts some doubts on the advantages of the internationalization process.

Because universities have a good understanding of changes nature, as Nick Foskett points out 'universities in all countries have responded to the increased transnational mobility of students through strategies ranging from direct marketing to the provision of overseas campuses and the establishment of student mobility partnerships'⁶ still universities face difficulties when trying to make adaptation themselves through demands. The changes in 'ideology' seems the most difficult for the Albanian post – socialist reality, since it does not mean only changes in the internal ruling philosophy but also changes in the mentality, which is much more difficult to change. It constitutes a hamper to adaptate the present legislation to the ongoing transformations of the Albanian society and the market demands. Still an 'entrepreneurial university' is perceived negatively from the majority of Albanian people and education is seen as a non – profit sector which isolate it from the market demands. Thus all these factors have their impact on the internationalization of study programs and academic quality issues.

3. Internationalization of study programs and academic quality issue

According to Hans van Ginkel "internationalization is crucial for the quality of research and its applications, but in particular also for the adequate preparation of new generations of students to play leading roles in a world in which labor markets and, indeed all economies are regionalizing beyond national

⁵ Williams, G. and Kitaev, I. (2005). 'Overview of national policy contexts for entrepreneurialism in Higher education institutions'. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 3. p. 135.

⁶ Foskett, N. (2010). *Global markets, national challenges, local strategies: the strategic challenge of internationalization*. London: Continuum p. 35

borders, internationalizing and even globalizing”⁷. I put this statement to show that internationalization is not only connected to the study programs and their quality but also to the world of the labor and to the market. Thus the analyses become even more complex if we have to measure the academic quality and its employability. For this reasons there are different kinds of national and international rankings and it is no surprise that the Albanian institutions are ranked very low internationally, because seems that the Albanian public and private institutions have failed in both of them.

Only recently (2011) the Ministry of Education and Science of Albania charged the German company CHE – Centre for Higher Education Development to develop a concept for a ranking of Albanian higher education institutions at the national level and to generate a first pilot study which produced a multi – dimensional ranking based in groups and not in a league table. According to the final report published by CHE this kind of ranking “is aiming at transparency about the Albanian education system: its major purpose is to give information to prospective students and help them to make an informed choice”⁸. In contrary to the international rankings is that “international rankings cannot provide information and orientation to prospective students: their indicators are not appropriate for teaching oriented institutions”⁹.

The CHE ranking dimensions included: student profile, study incomes, international orientation, research, teaching & learning, facilities, labor market, overall assessment and the city in which is based the university¹⁰. In this kind of ranking the ‘international orientation’ dimension was assessed basing on: existence of double degree programs, international students, student exchange, international experience of academic staff, teaching in foreign language¹¹. According to the final results of CHE the main outcome of internationalization of higher education institutions in Albania was in the international experience of the staff than of the students or of the programs. Thus, it resulted that the percentage of the Albanian staff returning from studies abroad is 16% at the Social Sciences, 13% at Law and 11% at Business. The international exchange of students is in very low figures only 1% which is the same also for the joint degree programs and percentage of course in foreign language.

⁷ Hans van Ginkel “More than a tradition and ambition: internationalization in higher education” in *Paths to internationalization - higher education policies, trends and strategies in Europe and Slovenia*. 2011 Klemen Miklavic (eds).

⁸ CHE – Centre for Higher Education Development. “Development of ranking in Albania”. Contract No. MoES / CS/ CQ/ 008/ 2010. July 2011. p.5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p.32

It can be said the same thing regarding the participation of Albanian public and private institutions in the European Commission projects such as Erasmus Mundus and TEMPUS. Basing on the official statistics the number of Albanian students and academic staff participating in the program Erasmus Mundus for joint degree from 2004 to 2011 is 91 students and very few researchers (3 in total). In the other program, Erasmus Mundus – Partnerships the figures are more encouraging. In total between the years 2008 to 2009 have participated 93 undergraduate, Master, PhD students and academic staff¹².

An explanation for the low records of international orientation of Albanian public and private universities can be found in their internal structures and organizations. Usually the international cooperation of Albanian universities is based on formal agreements and rigid bureaucracies and structures. Generally, the role of the universities and institutions of higher education is closely related to 'their contribution to the cultivation of knowledge, as well as for the utility of education and research to the economy and society'¹³. Others point out that universities are responsible for the "development, transfer and preservation of knowledge"¹⁴. But in the Albanian society after the collapse of communism their social role seems to have been diminished. As Sachi Hatakenaka and Quentin Thompson point out in their report on 'Albania Higher Education': "unfortunately in Albania, neither the private sector nor the government or its agencies tend to engage with universities on an institutions basis; they prefer to make arrangements directly with individual academics"¹⁵. This kind of problem differs from public and private institutions but it has also to do with the role of the government and the impact of internationalization in developing countries. On one hand the Albanian government and the national law want to give more autonomy to the public universities and on the other hand they want to limit their public expenses and direct their policies on the self – financing. Regarding private universities there are other more rigid government policies. Beyond national policies are the international agreements and standards such as the Bologna process which are crucial not only for the universities quality but also for their international recognition of their diplomas. As Hans von Ginkel points out "internationalization is not just an add –on but an essential part of all the activities in higher education and scientific research and their service

¹² European Commission. TEMPUS Programme. Higher Education in Albania. p.10.

¹³ Teichler, U. (1997). Higher Education and graduate employment in Europe. Tser Research Proposal. P.10.

¹⁴ Hans van Ginkel "More than a tradition and ambition: internationalization in higher education" in Paths to internationalization - higher education policies, trends and strategies in Europe and Slovenia. 2011 Klemen Miklavic (eds) p. 9.

¹⁵ Hatakenaka, S., Thompsom, Q. (2006). Albania Higher Education Report. Report submitted to the European Investment Bank. p. 22.

to society, which is the core business of “true” universities”¹⁶. In fact, many Albanian universities are creating new structures to cope with the new necessities of European and global education. Generally, international cooperation in Albanian Higher Education institutions is managed by the International Relations Offices. These offices closely cooperate with foreign Higher Education institutions in the recognition of the international student mobility and degrees, legalization of documents, study transfers and mutual agreements. They assist their students in contacts with foreign students, with student mobility and in mutual activities, summer schools, etc¹⁷. Some universities have also added to their internal structures the position of the Vice – Rector for International Relations who creates the strategies to enhance the international cooperation.

However the issue of quality remains a problem and rarely it is measured in international terms than in local ones. This because as I mentioned above many of the Albanian universities have as their main activity: teaching while international rankings are based more on the research oriented universities. At the same time the quality as a concept is more related to the government of a given country since still the role of the university is perceived in national terms than global ones. Till global issues emerge frequently in national higher education systems. In Albania global issues such as the unification of degrees, their universal recognition, the English language tests and other problems related to the exchange of students and the mobility of academic staff are becoming increasingly important in the internal agendas of public and private universities.

4. European University of Tirana- adapting to new challenges – case study

As I superficially mentioned in the other parts of this paper, the internationalization challenges created the conditions for the new university structure of European University of Tirana, introduced for the first time in Albania, has a self-perpetuating governing body with complete authority and responsibility for all aspects of the university’s operation, including considerable expertise about university funding, curricular trends, student access, and other matters essential to the successful delivery of higher education to the people. It is the organizational construct that acquires money and other resources, provides the administrative infrastructure that supports their work, creates the connective mechanisms that link the guilds for the purposes of undergraduate education

¹⁶ Hans van Ginkel “More than a tradition and ambition: internationalization in higher education” in Paths to internationalization - higher education policies, trends and strategies in Europe and Slovenia. 2011 Klemen Miklavic (eds) p. 9.

¹⁷ European Commission. TEMPUS Programme. Higher Education in Albania. p.6.

and other joint enterprises, and protects the institution from external pressures that might impair its effectiveness.

While retaining the supervisory role of ensuring effective operation and managing and promoting institution-wide objectives, the governing body delegates its authority and responsibility to institutional management, through dispersed leadership and with a clear relationship. In achieving these aims, the quality engine of the EUT operates its three Colleges as separate domains nonetheless connected within the boundaries of the institution itself. Distinct hierarchy levels are created for: formulation of strategies (top – down perspective), dispersed leadership (top – down), exercise leadership (bottom – up) and maintaining total quality management (TQM) principles (top – down, parallel).

The core of the engine is composed of departments, defined as organized collections of individual experts joined by their shared commitment to a particular methodological and subject approach to knowledge and driven by a system of common standards and criteria for quality. The departments manage: teaching activity, teaching content, research activity and human resources. Faculty and students, pursuing their individual goals within the context of the university's academic programs develop their skills and use them to create additional value either in the form of enhanced capabilities as graduates or of contributions to new knowledge through research. Through this process, quality depends on the rigor of the standards applied and assurance of these standards. While the legal and structural change is under way at EUT, mechanisms are created for constant monitoring not just of quantitative indicators, but of the mood of the personnel key to the delivery of the changed model of operating, which the paper illustrates and analyses. The new management model has created also some flexible structures for research support and other support activities.

At the end it is important to assess that a successful implementation of the EUT project for major changes to leadership, management and university structure will give to this young university the empowerment and growth potential needed for its successful competition in the complex Albanian higher education market. But, it will also serve as a model of innovative approach to challenges faced by higher education institutions to other private and public universities, in Albania and in the broader Euro-Mediterranean area.

5. Conclusions

Internationalization of higher education in Albania although an emerging necessity is still in very low figures not only as a connection between institutions but even as mobility between students. The pressure on the Albanian universities, both from internal and external factors is very tough and at the same time has become a very competitive system since with visa liberalization uni-

versities are operating in a very open education market. Even though Albania has not yet been integrated at the European Union and has made little progress at the globalization processes, it has been affected by these integration concerns. Albanian Higher Education system is a mixture between local and internal strategies of universities, national strategies of the Ministry of Education and Science, European strategies (particularly of Bologna Process) and globalization processes. Thus, in our days the debate is focused on international student mobility, higher education reforms and problems, the role of English language teaching and testing, the commoditization and standardization of Higher Education, partnerships for studying abroad and so on.

My main thesis was that Albanian HE institutions increasingly need to put more efforts to internationalize their internal management structures and to put in practice international study programs. The paper is based on the case of European University of Tirana and explores the difficulties of the faculties of this university to find financial support for international programs, research and travelling abroad, to develop courses with one international perspective, support for its students to study abroad, support to students from other countries and on other indicators such as grants, contracts and linkages in international areas. However the paper deals also with the academic requirements the issue of quality of universities in general. It included also some statistics and results of national and international rankings of Albanian institutions.

