

The Impact of International Standards on Higher Education Institutions in Albania

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Abstract

While Albania has in place the key structures of the education system, the past educational legislation and reforms were not sufficient to fully develop the institutions of higher education. The attempts to establish premium-quality universities and research institutions were continued with the New Law on Higher Education. However, the standards in higher education, particularly in terms of scientific research, are still not on a sufficiently high level; the country itself is facing serious social and economic challenges, and research programs are both small in scope and regionally fragmented. Over the last decade, the vocabulary of marketing has been applied to the field of education; today, its scope includes several dimensions, all of them aimed at attracting new students. The contemplated research focuses on the characteristics of a new conceptual model that describes the application process for Albanian higher education in regards to the theoretical framework that includes educational philosophy, social justice theory, and educational governance. Namely, the main goals of the research are: to identify the role of new laws and regulations in the higher education system; to explore the effects of the application system from the students' point of view; to provide a comparative history of the educational systems in other countries; and to compare and contrast the relevant literature.

Keywords: Albania, higher education, management, conceptual model, application.

Introduction

Education cannot be separated from the historical, political, and social conditions in which it surfaced and in which it has been developed and institutionalized. Education is necessary on a social level for increasing cultural and scientific awareness and capacity, for realizing the process of civilization, and ultimately for ensuring our departure from primitivism. Education acts as a civilizing force in nations and has been present in Albania since the time of the Illyrians.

Legislation on education and educational reforms were approved by the Albanian Parliament on April 11, 1933. Under these reforms, schools emphasized a nationalist spirit and aimed at having high pedagogical standards. Primary education was compulsory and free for all citizens. The school had a national, governmental, and secular nature. Private schools established in Albania were either nationalized or closed. In 1935, this issue was brought before the International Courts, and the Court of Hague judged the ruling as unfair. As a result, in 1936 the government allowed some private cleric schools and minority schools to open.

In 1938, a new educational reform was approved, mainly designed and organized by fascist Italy, which had long-term goals of laying the foundations for the occupation of Albania. This reform limited the general secondary education, removing two of the six upper secondary schools and establishing vocational schools. At first, the

secondary school consisted of 6 year groups; however, as a result of the reform in 1939, two more classes were later added, thus creating eight years of school, divided into two cycles (low and high), with two branches (classic and real).

Albania could not, however, claim to have a fully developed higher education system at the time. For that reason, Albanian students completed their studies in different countries. The main educational centres to which the Albanian students gravitated were in Italy, Greece, Austria, France, Romania, and Germany.

Theoretical Framework

Any change in the current higher education system must take into consideration the major themes regarding philosophy of education, social justice, and educational governance. The educational reconstruction is closely linked to the practical changes caused by overall development of the country; educational philosophy is crucial in evaluating ideas and ideals included in the reform process. Moreover, the reforms of educational policy must adhere to the social justice agenda, which, in turn, addresses a range of issues vital for establishing the fully functional educational system which provides equal opportunities to the students. It is also important to develop and establish the proper governance structure, which would fully adhere to the contemporary settings of the country's educational system.

Regardless of the recent positive trends, the higher education system in Albania still lacks quality. It is a major disadvantage, which negatively affects Albanian economic, social, and political development. Developing the system which would adhere to the world-class educational standards is a matter of national importance. For that reason, any solutions must be developed in accordance to the proposed theoretical framework.

The Evolution of Management and Scientific Research

Universities and research institutions, which deal mainly with scientific research and which have sufficient human resources capacity, need to set up academic research groups. Such groups should act as the basic platform from which the institutions can conduct research operations within their respective departments or faculties. The New Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Albania provides for the establishment of such structures.

Supporting the establishment of a Regional Development Centre is particularly important in public schools, which have more limited capacities for research. Such facilities would allow researchers from different faculties and departments to collaborate on various projects in order to carry out important studies for the region. Regarding the higher education strategy, the establishment of these centres should be supported by a primary promotional fund. The mission of these centres—similar to public development agencies and technology transfer institutes—consists of realizing academic studies, developing projects, and facilitating the transfer of knowledge and technologies. These centres, agencies, and institutes are not only structures of the central government—depending on the ministries overseeing them—but also private enterprises. They deal with scientific research, innovation, and technology, as well as

the transfer of knowledge in their fields.

This aspect of the higher education system in Albania is still in its early stages of development. However, the development trend is considered a positive one. There are some similar existing private units in the form of institutes or NGOs with a clear profile of the competences required in their field of research, particularly in the field of economic and social analysis for example.

The lower standards in higher education, particularly in terms of scientific research, are due to the prioritization of quantity over quality in education and the limited focus on scientific research. Public and private higher education institutions do not focus on scientific research owing to the lack of funds and infrastructure. Actual social and economic challenges in Albania are very complex, but research programs are small in scope and regionally fragmented. Such problems require a mutual and widespread mobilization of resources, as well as careful identification of the necessary protocols building research capacities, in order to respond to various market needs. Addressing capacity development in research across Albania must take into account the major differences in terms of population size and quality of life in communities throughout the country. Furthermore, discrepancies in terms of the financial resources available should be taken into account, and funds in education and scientific research should be allocated and implemented according to such specifications. The main objectives of increasing research capacities include facilitating learning and knowledge exchange experiences in the region, coordinating research and scientific policies in the region, and intervening in particular cases. Albanian researchers are certainly aware of the main challenges facing their country; they are hindered by serious deficiencies in methodological training and by their isolation from international debates on the production and development of knowledge. They also face obstacles due to a lack of management cooperation and their lack of integration within the infrastructure of scientific research in the country, as well as an unwillingness of institutions to facilitate such cooperation.

The Evolution of Marketing in Higher Education Institutions

Any direct comparison between the university sphere and the business world would have been unimaginable up until a few decades ago. The mission of higher education institutions has been to transfer knowledge and skills to students and provide training and preparation in order to advance their professional skills, while business, from the financial perspective, exists to generate profit. Many higher education institutions have implemented business models from successful companies, and have thus found ways to improve financial management and to efficiently manage human resources—a particularly important factor in this regard. Professionals have borrowed relevant business concepts from the field of development and administration (student services) and have adapted these to higher education institutions. Over the last decade, the vocabulary of marketing—particularly concepts such as market research, market segmentation, and strategic planning—has been applied to the field of education. According to a number of authors, marketing in higher education is considered a relatively new concept; indeed, for a few decades. Today, marketing in higher education has extended its scope to include new dimensions, such as attracting

financial investment and enhancing the institution's image, again with the ultimate aim of attracting new students. Knowledge in this area, and of implementing marketing plans in the non-profit sector, poses challenges for strategic operations in many higher education institutions, especially in developing countries.

Philosophy of Education

Philosophy of education may be regarded as the general theory of education. The two disciplines are intimately connected: according to John Dewey (2014), philosophy of education is “an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect of the difficulties in contemporary social life” (p. 356). However, philosophy is not a science. It deals with problems originating in social life and addresses contemporary social practice and attempts to “comprehend the varied details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole” (Dewey, 2014, p. 349). It is not knowledge either: grounded knowledge is science; however, philosophy is connected with thinking, which is, in turn, a response to the known. For that reason, distinct social groups evaluate the same difficulties in social practice differently, which leads to development of different value systems.

There are two major tasks of philosophy that are directly linked to their educational equivalents: 1. criticizing existing values; and 2. interpreting the results of special sciences in regard to their future social impact. For that reason, the reconstruction of philosophy, education, and social ideas alike are mutually inclusive: the educational reforms happen due to major social changes, which are, in turn, connected to the development of science, industry, and democracy. Major practical changes demand an educational reform; educational philosophy must provide answers to which ideas and ideals must be included in the reconstruction process, which are inherited from other cultures, and whether those acquired systems need to be revised to fully adhere to the principles of the perceived change.

Social Justice

In studies of educational policy, social justice theory draws attention to the production and reproduction of inequalities. Gewirtz (1998) outlines two major dimensions of social justice: 1. Distributional justice – “the conventional conception of social justice”, – which refers to the principles of the distribution of material and non-material resources; and 2. Relational justice, which refers to the “nature and ordering of social relations” – namely, the ways in which the members of society treat each other on both macro and micro level (pp. 470–471). According to the author, the two dimensions are interconnected.

Regarding social justice, the education policy must address a range of issues. Gewirtz (1998) names the following: exploitative relationships; process of marginalization and inclusion; building of relationships between education workers and students which are based on mutual recognition, respect, and care; affirmation, universalization or rejection of cultural differences; and subverting violent practices within and beyond the education system (p. 482). While such framework may be broad, it is clear that

any reforms of education policy must adhere to a social justice agenda.

Educational Governance

Governance is a framework which includes common concepts relating to structure and process of education. Glatter, Mulford, and Shuttleworth (2003) establish four models of governance: “competitive market (CM), school empowerment (SE), local empowerment (LE), and quality control (QC); regarded as ideal types, those models include different forms of school autonomy, modes of accountability, forms and functions of intermediate authority, and school leadership. Governance structures vary between national contexts; for that reason, the approach to the management of internal relations must be developed according to the contemporary settings of the specific country’s educational system.

Albanian History of Education

Economic and social developments after 1991 created the need for further changes to university content. The market required new specialists and the university needed to be restructured to fulfil these requirements. The Law on Higher Education that had come into force, which relied entirely on communist ideology, needed to be amended. On April 6, 1994, Parliament approved Law No 7810 “On Higher Education in the Republic of Albania” 83, which has subsequently been improved and accomplished. From 1992 onwards, the University of Tirana signed agreements related to assistance and cooperation with many European and American universities. Between 1991 and 2000, a large number of academic staff completed postgraduate studies, along with taking part in long-term and short-term placements abroad. Yet, the increasing number of teaching staff working abroad provoked a negative phenomenon, which complicated the issue in general: having completed their placements abroad, a relatively large number of pedagogues did not return to Albania or to their university of origin, owing to economic reasons. Between 1995 and 2000, the pedagogues did not return to their universities of origin. From 1991 onwards, a significant number of higher education institutions were given university status. All these developments led to progress in terms of science and cultural development of the country. The history of establishing higher education institutes, and the establishment of the universities through said institutes, demands rigorous work in accordance with the available infrastructure and legal context of the time. Scientific research nowadays is considered to be an essential component of academic life, along with playing a specific role in the development of Albanian society.

The prospect of potential collaboration with other European countries, along with the expansion of existing community states, created the right conditions for extending the boundaries of this reality. European institutions of higher education accepted the challenge of constructing the European Higher Education Area. On June 19, 1999, thirty Ministers of higher education across the European states signed the “Bologna Declaration.” The signatory states agreed to coordinate higher education policies and to achieve in the short term—or at least within the first decade of the third

millennium—the following objectives:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, in order to promote employability in every European country;
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate: the first cycle of studies lasts a minimum of three years; the degree awarded after the first cycle is also relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification; the second cycle should lead to a master and/or doctorate degree;
- Establishment of a system of credits, known as the ECTS system (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System);
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement, with particular attention to recognition and valorisation, qualification and researching, etc;
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance with regard to curricular development and inter-institutional cooperation.

Scientific Research in Albania

The qualitative development of human resources and their adaptation to the labour market represents a strategic target for the growth of higher education in Albania. In this way, the increasing number of young people who commence and complete higher education represents a challenge for educational policy. Furthermore, the quality of service provided in this field needs to be improved accordingly.

Higher education in Albania has been engaged in reform and restructuring in line with the Bologna process. The country has officially been a member of this process since the signing of the Bologna Declaration, on September 19, 2003. These developments are also in accordance with the National Strategy for Higher Education 2008–2013 (SKALA), which summarizes the Albanian Government's proposals for the development of higher education.

In accordance with the rules and principles of the European area, institutions of Higher Education in Albania have autonomy and academic freedom under Law no 9741, dated 21.5.2007, "On Higher Education in the Republic of Albania" (as amended). The following are considered higher education institutions: universities, academies, vocational colleges, higher education schools, and interuniversity centres. The ECTS system has been implemented across higher education in order to increase the mobility of students (according to European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). Higher education institutions offer accredited education programs organized into modules, and evaluated using ECTS credits. The average number of credits per year for a full-time student is 60. The Law for Institutions of Higher Education provides for quality assurance at all higher education institutions.

Higher Education in Poland

The Republic of Poland is located in Central Europe and is a member of the European Union. Its higher education comes under the remit of the Ministry of Science and

Higher Education. There are two major categories of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Poland: university and non-university (Poland Higher Education Ministry, 2017a). Non-university HEIs in Poland include those higher schools aiming to give students professional education in various fields (Poland Higher Education Ministry, 2017b). Examples include military, church, and non-public higher schools. Ownership of higher education is either public or non-public (private). Poland follows the European standards of higher education, which have facilitated the management of educational matters, especially in terms of degree recognition outside Poland. For instance, Poland conforms to the guidelines of the Bologna Process and strictly implements the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in its degree system (Poland Higher Education Ministry, 2017a). The degree system is based on a three-cycle study structure and is aligned with the ECTS. The first study cycle is the undergraduate level, comprising 3 to 4 years of study, while the second study cycle is the master's level of 1-2 years (UTP, 2015). To obtain a degree, students are required to earn 180–240 ECTS credits and 90–120 ECTS credits in cycles one and two, respectively. The third study cycle is the doctorate, which takes 3 to 4 years (UTP, 2015). To qualify for a doctoral degree, students must pass their particular examinations and successfully defend their dissertations before the selected panel. To graduate with a diploma, students are required to undergo training in all the recommended subjects, successfully defend their project, and pass examinations. The Polish education policy and laws provide clear guidelines regarding the management and operation of both public and non-public higher education institutions. For instance, all higher education institutions are required to practice autonomy at all levels (Poland Higher Education Law, 2005). This means that an institution can freely carry out its activities without interference from the national government. For instance, institutions are allowed to decide freely on their financial matters, develop their own curriculum for various courses, and internally confer degrees to qualifying students. The Polish laws only provide funding for public higher education institutions (Eurydice Unit, 2014). Such funds are geared towards supporting students' education, research staff, renovation and repair, and enhancing various projects in public institutions. In some cases, non-public institutions of higher learning can request funding from the government based on the regulations and conditions of the Ministry of Education.

Higher education in Poland seems to pursue an organized process of curriculum dispensation, clearly defined systems, and educational policies. The institutions strictly follow the curriculum philosophies of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The educational policies grant autonomy and provide for the funding of higher education institutions and their students.

Higher Education in the USA

There are two major classifications of higher education institutions in the USA: public and private institutions. The public institutions are either two-year or four-year institutions. Public-two-year institutions are community colleges that enrol undergraduate students, award associate degree qualifications in various vocations,

provide community service, and prepare students for the four-year institutions (Eckel and King, n.d.; Aacc, n.d.). The public four-year institutions are colleges and universities whose aim is to train undergraduates and graduates for various degree qualifications (Eckel and King, n.d.). Furthermore, the private institutions are divided into two major categories: not-for-profit and private-for-profit institutions. On the one hand, private not-for-profit institutions are highly diverse and include universities, liberal art colleges, faith based institutions linked to various denominations, specialized institutions, and historically black colleges (Eckel and King, n.d.). On the other hand, private for-profit institutions mostly offer vocational trainings that lead to the award of certificates; that is to say, they rarely offer degree programs (Eckel and King, n.d.). The US curriculum philosophy regarding higher education recognizes five major degrees: associate degrees from two-year institutions, bachelor's degrees, and three graduate degrees (masters, professional, and doctorate) (Eckel and King, n.d.; Aacc, n.d.).

According to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), the federal government policy cannot supersede the autonomy of certain higher learning institutions, especially in terms of decisions related to developing the curriculum, recommending textbooks, and providing supplementary learning materials. Such institutions include the University of Michigan and the University of California. There are, however, some instances where different states are given the authority to play a role in governing of higher institutions. In such cases, a state agency acts as an intermediary between the higher education institution and the state government (Eckel and King, n.d.). It is argued that such guidelines are based on the Jeffersonian ideal of limited locally-controlled government (Eckel and King, n.d.). The financing of US higher institutions is quite diverse and closely linked to the Jeffersonian ideal that market competition promotes efficiency and quality. Although the federal government plays a major role in financing higher institutions, there are other sources of revenue, such as the school fees paid by the students, grants, appropriations, local governments, private gifts, and sales from enterprises and services related to the institutions (Eckel and King, n.d.; US College and Higher Education, n.d.).

The US higher institutions have clearly defined guidelines on curriculum philosophy, the education system, and government policy. The education system classifies higher institutions as public or private, and the curriculum defines various learning levels, ranging from vocational associate degrees to bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. The government policies grant autonomy to some higher learning institutions, but retain control over others. The policies also provide for funding of the institutions and their students.

Higher Education in Singapore

The Republic of Singapore is located in South East Asia and is the only island city-state in the world. There are various categories of higher institutions in Singapore, and they are mostly based on the levels of education they offer. They include junior colleges or centralized institutes, polytechnics, arts institutions, and universities (Singapore Post-Secondary Education, 2016a). Junior colleges are preparatory institutions that

equip students with the adequate knowledge and skills to facilitate the transition to universities and other higher learning institutions within Singapore and beyond. On the other hand, polytechnics offer hands-on experience, while also ensuring that students obtain the relevant industrial skills and capabilities. The Institute of Technical Education equips students with the relevant technical skills required for various work environments, while the Institute of Arts focuses on improving the artistic potential of its students in areas such as graphic design, performing, and fine arts (Singapore Post-Secondary Education, 2016a). The universities fall into the two categories of public and private. The curriculum philosophies of Singapore recognize various levels of education in higher learning institutions, including diplomas, bachelor's, master's, professional, and doctorate degrees. Post-secondary (or non-tertiary) and diploma courses take 2 to 3 years, while university courses take between 3 and 5 years depending on the level of the degree (Singapore Statistics, 2015).

Singapore has five publicly-funded universities and they are all autonomous (Singapore Post-Secondary Education, 2016b). This means that the universities can freely innovate, strategize, and initiate differentiations with minimal government interference. All public higher institutions receive funding from the Singapore government. Although private, SIM University also receives funding from the government because it is the only local, not-for-profit private university in Singapore (Singapore Post-Secondary Education, 2016a). Notably, the school fees for all public funded higher education institutions are highly subsidized to ensure that most students are able to pursue the education program of their choice (Singapore Post-Secondary Education, 2016a).

Singapore's higher education system is comprised of junior colleges or centralized institutes, polytechnics, arts institutions and universities. The qualification levels include diplomas and university degrees, such as bachelor's, master's, and doctorate. The government policies stipulate that all five public universities should receive funding and should be granted full autonomy. The policies also provide for subsidizing of school fees for higher institutions to enhance equitable access to higher education.

Higher Education in Zambia

Zambia is an independent republic located in Southern Africa. Its higher education institutions are classified into universities (public and private), colleges, and specialized institutes. There are also technical institutes that offer diverse two-year certificate courses and three-year diplomas (UNESCO, 2011). Universities offer three levels of degrees, namely bachelor's, master's, and doctorate. Bachelor's degrees normally last for at least four years, while the completion time for master's and doctorate programs can vary, depending on whether one studies part-time or full-time. On the one hand, master's programs last for a period of at least four or six semesters for full-time and part-time students respectively (UNESCO, 2011). On the other hand, doctoral programs last a period of six or eight semesters for full-time or part-time students respectively (UNESCO, 2011). Postgraduate diplomas normally run on a full-time basis for a period of two semesters.

Zambian higher education laws and policies provide clear guidelines regarding

the governance, funding, and autonomy of institutions. For instance, the Higher Education Act (2013) stipulates that all public institutions of higher learning should receive funding from the national government. The funding is aimed at supporting institutions to improve their research and development activities, and to promote international cooperation. Additionally, there are provisions for student assistance programs to ensure equitable access to higher education for all students (Higher Education Act, 2013). Every institution has a Council of Higher Education that decides on governance issues (Higher Education Act, 2013). These councils, at all times, act in the interest of the particular higher education institution, thus promoting autonomy. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Zambia is responsible for setting standards, quality assurance, and providing regulatory and advisory services to institutions of higher learning in the country (HEA, 2015).

It is clear that the higher education system in Zambia classifies its institutions into universities, colleges, and specialized institutes. The curriculum philosophies allow such institutes to offer various course completion awards, such as certificates (in the case of colleges and institutes) and bachelors, master's and doctorate degrees (in the case of universities). The government's policies provide for the funding of higher education institutions in Zambia, and stipulate that the Council of Higher Education in each particular institution should be responsible for governance. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) conducts quality control of Zambian higher education institutions.

Higher Education in Ukraine

Ukraine is located in Eastern Europe, and is recognized as a sovereign state. The Ukrainian higher education system is probably among the best in the world, given its long history and current reputation (Ukraine Ministry of Education, 2016). According to statistics, higher education institutions were established in Ukraine as early as the 17th Century; from the beginning, they attracted students from other countries (Ukraine Ministry of Education, 2016). Ukraine joined the Bologna Process in 2005, a situation that effectively signalled its integration into the European Education System and adherence to European guidelines. In relation to the Bologna Process, there are three major levels of higher education in Ukraine. The first cycle lasts for a minimum of three years and leads to a bachelor's degree, while the second cycle leads to a master's degree (Bologna Declaration, 1999). The third level leads to a doctorate degree (Bologna Declaration, 1999). There is a qualification required for colleges in Ukraine, which leads to the award of junior specialist diploma (UNESCO, 2006; Bukovina University, n.d.). To ensure conformity with the Bologna Process, the Ukrainian higher education institutions use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) when awarding degrees.

Until recently, the Ukrainian higher education policies and laws did not grant any form of autonomy to institutions. Reports of 2014 show that the new government, through the Ministry of Education, was planning to change this situation and grant more autonomy to universities (Tatsenko, 2014). Furthermore, the Ukraine treasury tightly controls the financial autonomy of higher learning institutions in the country

(British Council, 2015). Specifically, grants, funding, and other forms of financial support are held by the treasury, often making them difficult for higher learning institutions to access (British Council, 2015). There is, however, a new higher education policy that aims to address this and other challenges. The policy's specific targets include promoting access to higher education, integration with the European Higher Education area, and financial support for research and development at institutions of higher learning (British Council, 2015).

Ukraine's education system and curriculum philosophies endorse the Bologna Process to a great extent. Higher education institutions offer three cycles of learning, awarding bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees respectively. The Ukrainian government's policies maintain tight control over the funding and autonomy of higher learning institutions. There are, however, new proposals seeking to reverse such policies and to ensure that higher education institutions in Ukraine can exercise autonomy.

All six countries (Albania, Poland, USA, Singapore, Zambia, and Ukraine) seem to have similar higher education guidelines, in spite of some slight differences. For instance, all six countries have both public and private categories of higher education institutions. Additionally, all six countries have clearly defined qualifications at each level: ranging from the "lower" level certificate and diploma qualifications in colleges and polytechnics, to the "higher" level of degrees in universities. The government policies in all six countries make provisions for funding higher learning institutions, in addition to granting them autonomy. Ukraine is the only country of the six, however, that does not grant autonomy to its institutions and maintains strict control of government officials tasked with funding the institutions.

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