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**THE CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION
IN ALBANIA**

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Abstract

Albania is a small country in transition from a centrally planned economy to a more market oriented one, within a democratic political framework. Being an important and very sensitive sector, the higher education has undergone various reforms since the collapse of communism in 1991. During these years the challenge of different Albanian governments has been matching the growing demand for higher education and limited financial resources. If the first decade of Albanian transition is characterized by increased number of state universities, in the second one private universities were stimulated. In fact the existing high institutions all over Albania were transformed in universities, but what's more interesting is the shimmering spread of private sector. During the period 2005–2013 almost 50 new private universities were licensed and the number of students in the private sector increased 15 fold. The government limited itself to accrediting such institutions without attempting to rank or evaluate them. In such circumstances what's suffers most, among others, is the quality. The priorities of Albanian higher education system are principles like: European Higher education area values harmonization, fostering scientific research and training methods for the academic staff, ensure students and staff mobility, assurance of quality and efficiency of studies.

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1. Introduction

Albania is looking to take its place within European Community. We are conscious enough that this process takes time. To be a member of European family, we need to have a more skilled and educated working population. In this direction has gone the government educational policy the last ten years. The challenge of higher education in Albania in the first decade, after the collapse of communism, has been the increase of the number of state-owned higher education institutions (HEIs). From 2005 to 2013, we have massive high education through the opening of a large number of private universities to meet the additional demand for higher education. This situation resulted in a serious drop of teaching quality and research work. Higher education institutions in Albania are governed by the Law for Higher Education approved by the Parliament. A number of laws have been adapted since the fall of communism, worth mentioning are: Law No. 9741, dated May 5, 2007, "On Higher Education in the Republic of Albania", Law No. 10 307, dated July 22, 2010, "On Higher Education in the Republic of Albania" and recently Law No.80/2015, "For higher education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Albania". As a result of the frequent changes of the law, the structure of high education in Albania is transformed and too much is lost in terms of quality.

On 18 September 2003, Albania officially joined the Bologna process. Since then, higher education legislation has been updated with a view to supporting the Bologna process reforms and responding to national needs.

In more than 20 years of transition, the university system has undergone changes that have increased domestic competition and liberalized admissions at the university, but on the other hand, according to experts, they have created a quiescence of financial dependence, academic standards and comparability with institutions abroad.

2. Problem Statement

The specific problem of high education in Albania is the rapid massification in one hand and the unprecedented growth of private providers. To cope with this situation the government approved new regulations partly loaned from British educational system which aim at merging the state and the private sectors, transforming all HEIs into non-profit institutions that will be partly financed by the state and partly through private means. The system is facing with various challenges so that a great number of academicians doubt about their success in Albanian reality. In such circumstances what's suffers most are the quality of teaching and research work.

3. Research Questions

- Is it possible to change the cultural point of view of the teaching staff in the way they see their profession?
- The changes made in the last law are planned or as a response to external pressure.
- Is the British model the best one for Albanian reality?

4. Purpose of the Study

- To improve the quality of teaching and research work in public and private higher education institutions, making the system more responsive to the labour market and strategic development of Albania.
- To strengthen the financial stability of universities by diversifying sources of income and standardize the control mechanisms to ensure that they are in line with European standards.

5. Research Methods

Changes in political leadership do affect the overall approach of the government toward higher education. The frequent change of the government approach toward higher education influence directly the institutions of higher education, the academic staff and students. The law Nr. 80/2015 brought about some innovations in terms of autonomy, finance and quality of teaching but it seems difficult to put them into practise. I will try to explain such innovations based on various studies and reports as well as in the reality of facts and living testimonies.

6. Findings

In 2015 was approved a new law on higher education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Albania. It has reformed enough the life of Higher Education Institutions. This reform sees higher education in the perspectives of the students and pedagogues, how this education can be improved to have more quality teaching for the student and a more quality academic life for the pedagogue. The most distinguished innovations of it are, autonomy or real independence of higher education institutions, improvement of quality and increasing the scientific research work and measuring indicators.

6.1. Autonomy

Autonomy has been and continue to be the key point of academic discussion. The debate on the autonomy in higher education is linked to problems of funding higher education and the choice of financial management systems. The main source of funding is the government, with a small proportion of revenues raised via tuition fees. The last law, following the British model, tends to go in the direction of a new status for universities, that of a foundation with the aim of giving great independence to them. This is very good but depends on how strong is the influence of the state, either in finance or in other aspects of institutional independence. The actual framework of education in Albania “does not sufficiently recognize that an increase in university autonomy needs to be balanced both by increased accountability to the main stakeholders and by having clearer responsibilities for decisions which the management processes require” (Hatakenaka & Thompson, 2006, para 100).

The concept of management is relatively new for universities in Albania. Without good management, the pursuit of autonomy can border on anarchy, and I fear that this is happening. Greater autonomy in the universities can not be achieved by management changes. Something new in the last law

is the creation of implementing mechanisms to resolve every problem, but how do they function actually? Let's take a concrete example.

One of the innovations of the new law is the creation of administration Board in each university. In the article 48 it is said: "The Board of Administration in Public Institutions of Higher Education consists of seven members, part-time employees. Members, HEI representatives, are selected by the HEI's Academic Senate for a five-year term with the right of re-election from the lists proposed by the Higher Education Institution... If the institution provides itself fifty percent or more of the mid-term budget, four of the members are representatives of HEIs and three are representatives of the ministry responsible for education.

In cases where the institution provides itself less than fifty percent of the mid-term budget, three of the members are representatives of HEIs and four are representatives of the ministry responsible for education"¹ (Fletorja zyrtare, 2015 pp. 11466-11467). As we see law puts conditions before universities compromising their autonomy.

The investigative emission "BOOM" at RTV Ora News has conducted an observation at several universities in the country to see if autonomy functions as foreseen by the new law on higher education.

From the observation of "BOOM" it turned out that at the Polytechnic University, Aleksander Moisiu in Durrës, Aleksander Xhuvani in Elbasan and Luigj Gurakuqi in Shkodër, resulted that autonomy is in danger, as members of the board of administration are 4 to 3 in favor of the Ministry of Education, which makes the decision-making process pass on to the ministry's institution (Ora News, 2018).

What's worse is the fact that the law in general doesn't function quite well, as sustained by Prof. Duka, (2018), who underlines in her status on February 10, the lack of subsidiary acts of the same law that regulates the well-functioning of it. In addition, any subsidiary act approved by the government through the Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) seriously affect the academic autonomy of Universities. The case is for example of the DCM Nr.41/ 24.01.2018 by which the government offers a unique model of the syllabus (program) of the subject for all the universities of Albania.

On the other hand, administrators as decision makers seem to have an ambiguous role. They are chosen because of their competence as academicians to do many tasks that are not academic in nature (Lindquist, 1974).

We hope that these problems will be resolved in the immediate future as the government seems keen for universities to have more autonomy – and there would be undoubted benefit in them having it, especially on matters of finance and staffing. In such a situation we sustain that "There are three critical functions for government to perform with respect to higher education. The first is to ensure that the legal framework is right for the development and functioning of the system – public and private. The second is to supply some level of public funding. The third, which underpins the other two, is to have clear strategic aims for the sector and policies to achieve those aims" (Hatakenaka & Thompson, 2006, para 135).

6.2. The quality of teaching

Being member of academic staff I confess that the quality of teaching depends on academic staff qualities. As Hatakenaka & Thompson (2006, para 139) underline "The quality of academic staff within

¹ My translation

universities is often (mistakenly) judged by their qualifications, in particular, whether they have a PhD or not – whereas their quality ought to be judged by their competence in doing their job. For staff whose primary role is to teach – in whichever university, whether or not they hold a PhD is neither a sufficient, nor even a necessary condition for them to be able to teach. Nevertheless, a PhD is still often used inappropriately as a measure of staff quality; this is unfortunate both ways round: there are those with a PhD but who are not good at teaching and there are those who are excellent at teaching, but do not have a PhD”. Some years ago was a kind of confusion concerning PhD degree, because it was a kind of fashion to follow a PhD program in whatever direction. The great number of doctoral school students obliged the government to close it and now we don’t have a clear idea about the third cycle of studies.

To have a good performance in teaching (where most of us are engaged) the academic staff must take part in scholarship activities, seminars, workshops, to read literature just to be up to date with new developments in their fields and occasionally write about their experience: conducting a research work that is published internationally is not an essential requirement for good teaching. In fact with the new law the staff is going to be divided in two groups, in teaching and research work. Research work tends to improve the quality of teaching. In this direction goes even the modernization and liberalization of the curricula. Curriculum reform represents one of the priorities of Albanian higher education because it creates more flexible options for the students in order to become more independent learners. (Ladd & Dwight 1970; Lindquist, 1978).

Other priorities of Albanian universities are long-life-learning, distant learning and technology based learning.

7. Conclusion

Government’s aim to strengthen the role of higher education and research in its national development policy, can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim its position as the one who defines the rules of the game.

The rapid massification of higher education brought about the inability of the economy to absorb the rising number of graduates.

We have to keep in mind that we need to do changes in governance and management within universities as the balance for more autonomy.

To provide multi-disciplinary degrees and to promote the concept of long-life-learning as one of the leading future challenges for higher education

A clear policy about private universities in terms of staff, student and curricula. How and when public funds should assist them.

To improve further more the quality of programs in accordance with the changing needs of the economy

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