

## NEW TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION - THE CASE OF MACEDONIA

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### ABSTRACT

Ten years after its independence (1991), besides other social changes Macedonia also changed the concept the educational system at all levels, in particular higher education. Apart the public education which accrued in the framework of public universities, in 2001 for the first time was given legal opportunity for the opening of private universities while the educational policies had been orientated towards the Bologna Process. In this paper shall analyzed the current higher education policies related to the liberalization of the higher education, the legal possibilities for access to the higher education, as well the new trends and the challenges in this area. Also, will be carried out the empirical study, where students shall survey and would provide their judgments about the current situation in higher education in Macedonia.

**Key Words:** Higher education, universities in Macedonia.

### INTRODUCTION

Higher Education in Macedonia last decade is rapidly reformed. It is in the process of facing the certain difficulties in its quality, and in facing with the requirements of the time. With the reforms, attempted the higher education institutions to be strengthened in order to becoming more competitive in the global market of higher education, and to respond to requests from the public, that the educational system to enable and prepare the students with the skills and knowledge which will be enable them to fit quickly and easily conform to new circumstances in the labor market (Center for Research and Policy making (CRPM), 2009;14). Also, reforms are associated with pursuing the objectives of the Bologna process.<sup>1</sup>

The education system in the past did not prepare the appropriate staff for labor market needs. This is due to the vices of the former communist system, while public universities have had comfort, and are not worried about inadequate preparation of the students as true professionals which would contribute to the society where they live. In Macedonia, there has been lack of a strategy for profiling the staff, and there has been a lack of support from the state to deficit profiles in the labor market. This situation began to change with the opening of the private universities, and legal changes made to regulate the activities in the areas that are related with higher education (which are explained below), however, still need to work in this direction. In addition, we will examine briefly some strategies and laws that are related to reforms in higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> The process formally started by signing the Bologna Declaration from 29 states of the Council of Europe (19/06/1999) in Bologna. The statement aimed several objectives: the fit the education system based on cycles, to establish the European system of credits transfer, to promote the mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff, to promote the European cooperation in quality assurance. The Bologna Process is an unusual structured process leading from 46 countries that participate in it. It is not based on intergovernmental treaty, but in documents legally unenforceable. The Bologna Process represents a bridge that facilitates transfer from one study to another or from one country to another within the same field of study, but also contributes to increase the mobility of students and the academics. At the Conference of European Ministers on Education in Berlin in 2003, the Bologna Declaration was accepted by the new states, among them the Macedonia. With the introduction of European Credit Transfer System there are wider options for employment in the European market, but the inflexibility of the study programs and their weak connection with the practice still remain as the biggest weaknesses of the higher education in Macedonia.

Thus, Macedonia in 2004 prepared a *Strategy for education development for the period 2005-2015*, which aims mainly at preparing students for employment. This is supposed to be achieved through the preparation more flexible study programs which would prepare students with knowledge and skills to work, but even a development of study programs that would additionally qualify, re-qualify and change the qualification of the graduated students (Ministry of Education and Sciences, Skopje, 2004,;186).

Also, *The National Employment Strategy (2006-2010)* foresees special measures for addressing the unemployment of young unemployed persons (15-25 years of age): conducting analyses of the necessary skills, improved coordination between the education and the demands of the employers, volunteering practice for students during their education, training for all the young unemployed persons 6 months from the beginning of the unemployment at the latest, with the aim to weed out long-term unemployment of the young (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, December 2006;14).

In 2007 was brought *the Law on Volunteering*. This law offers a possibility to volunteer in state institutions or non-profit organizations where the organization should cover the expenses for food and transport of the volunteer (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No 85/07). Volunteering is still considered 'a nonpaid job' and a way to employment in the given organization. Unfortunately, because of the scarcity of the formal volunteering in Macedonia and the existing high rate of unemployment, the understanding of volunteering as an activity where the person gives value and quality, knowledge and skills and he does all that mainly out of altruistic reasons, is misinterpreted (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2004).

The changes and addendums to the *Law on Higher Education* from August 2008 should lead to reducing the gap between the education and the labor market. First of all, it is obligatory that 10% of the mandatory subjects and 10% of the optional subjects of every academic year are conducted through clinical teaching (i.e. by a prominent expert from the subject area) (Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No 35, 14.03.2008).

All these measures represent only one option to overcome existing shortcomings in the system of higher education, but how will they effect will depend on all the subjects involved, especially by law enforcement and stakeholders to be implement them into practice.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is survey design study. Students have answered 5 questions, in which they express their opinions about the questions posed on issues that affect their interests in higher education. In order to see how this topic is important, we carried out a Questionnaire (in February 2012) with 1.115 students in Public and Private Universities in Macedonia. Throughout selection of respondents, the demographic, ethnic, gender and geographic characteristics of the country have been respected. The questionnaire was conducted in university towns in Macedonia (Skopje, Tetovo, Bitola, Kumanovo, Kicevo, Stip, Ohrid etc), which included students from all universities and faculties in Macedonia.

Their readiness for cooperation clearly indicates that they are interested in improving the overall situation in higher education.

## THE AIM AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This study Aims to find out the opinions of the students, their judgments about the current situation in higher education in Macedonia and gives hope that the findings and recommendations will be seriously considered and taken into account when planning future development in institutions of the higher Education.

Although the importance of this paper is to address individual problems of students, however, considering the difficulties they face in the labor market, I think that their opinion will present a contribution to solving the problem. During the survey, casually met a student in master studies, who was graduated three years ago and spoke to us about his experience in studies, but also for employment vacancies for which he had applied. He claimed that after graduation has applied to over ten competitions but unsuccessfully. In the competition for jobs in the state institutions, have asked of him necessarily to join a political party in power, while private companies have asked the working experience, which he did not possess. He is convinced that the faculty has not prepared him enough to be found in the labor market, since he has taught theory and practical work carried out one month is insufficient to obtain the skills needed for employment. If hired now, that will be needed several months to adapt to the workplace.

With these problems facing almost all graduates, so I think that is of particular importance to get more student opinion to the problems that they encounter during their studies, which have to do with the quality of teaching.

## RESULTS

The survey results provide a realistic picture of the research subject. In our case, these results represent the views of students about current processes and policies on higher education. Specifically, students are those, for which legal measures are taken, improve conditions in the universities and technical infrastructure facilities, are trained teachers and strengthen measures to improve quality. Therefore, the free expression of students' opinion not only reflects their beliefs about reality in higher education policy, but also suggests other measures that can improve the current situation.

Table 1: Student Judgments on the Current Situation in Higher Education in Macedonia

<i>Question</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>No answer</i>
What impacts have the new measures of normative-legal character, dedicated teachers and their career advancement?	769 (69 %)	134 (12%)	212 (19%)
Is there in faculty evaluation system under which teachers assessed by students?	535 (48%)	446 (40%)	134 (12 %)
Do you think the faculty where you study, has implemented new methods for teaching?	435 (39%)	357 (32%)	323 (29%)
How would you assess the governmental actions for the liberalization of public higher education (the opening of new universities and dispensation of public universities)?	457 (41%)	535 (48%)	123 (11%)
Do you think the private universities, with all the advantages (better services) and weaknesses (higher prices) provide the real opportunities for the students, for a better education quality?	948 (85%)	100 (9%)	67 (6%)

In the first question, in general, students said that they had welcomed the new legal norms relating to the criteria for teaching. The law on Higher Education (Official Gazette No 35, 14.03.2008) in Chapter 10 (arts. 121-148) deals with Teacher academic titles. It clearly describes the conditions under which teachers can obtain scientific degrees, and career advance. Specifically, the teacher should have certain number of published scientific papers in international journals, must have achieved good results in research projects must have skill for teaching. The above provisions are intended to encourage teachers to be active even after their completion, to continue scientific and research activities, to pursue lifelong learning and to develop their

academic potential conforming to the requirements of the time. Approval of this law was not welcomed by most universities, especially public ones, due to the aforementioned provisions which impose more stringent conditions for academic advancement of professors. While teachers of State University "Cyril and Methodius" were organized to protest in the streets, other universities began to adapt to new legal provisions, by harmonizing internal acts with the Law on higher education. Today, most of the teachers make an effort to meet legal requirements to maintain the job or for their advancement, and remains a major challenge for older professors (those in the last decade of their careers) who it is difficult to meet such requirements.

Regarding the second question, the responses of students indicate that some universities (especially public, but some private) have not yet established a system for evaluation of teachers and in some cases students do not have information about this opportunity. However, in those universities where it is situated evaluation system for teachers (students do so either electronically, either by completing the questionnaire), was found to increase the quality of lectures, and improved quality of service delivery to students. In the case of SEE University, a continuation of the work contract or further engagement of teachers in the education process is closely related to the outcome of the evaluation by students. In addition, internal evaluation performed by competent authority at the University (Quality Assurance Office), established to enhance teaching performance.

In the third question, students claim that they expect more from what their teachers do. They are relatively satisfied with their teachers on how they are transformed and adapt to new trends. Since the Bologna process is an innovation for universities in Macedonia, is still expected that a good part of the teachers will adapt to the contemporary forms and methods of teaching. To achieve this, requires a more specific commitment from professors, and a more active role of students in the learning process. It is the teacher who must include students, develops interactive learning; to use tools, techniques and instruments appropriate to the teaching process; to use adequate resources and to motivate students. These circumstances impose a contemporary professor to be in step with technological development, Internet use, electronic libraries and guides students in using appropriate literature.

The fourth question relates closely with the government's decision to distribute the several faculties of state universities in more peripheral cities. To be more precise, it should be pointed out that state universities (but also some private) began to make the distribution of studies on small towns, so that almost every town there are 2 or 3 or more faculties, even in the same cities also repeated the same faculties of state universities and private ones. Students think that ... giving the possibility to study for all those who want to study have its advantages..., but most of them do not support the distribution of several research programs in outlying towns. This is substantiated by two reasons: first, this opportunity is short, since the distribution of several research programs in certain regions cannot hold out much, because over time will lose the interest of prospective students to those areas, and second, it will be extremely increased number of graduate staff in certain research programs while it reduces the requirements for other study programs due to geographical proximity to faculty and student. Even for a small country like Macedonia, these measures are estimated to have more political effect, which consists in prolonging the demands of citizens for employment while they study.

In question five, students estimate that private universities in Macedonia have good technical conditions and space for study, have better student and professional services, and have installed adequate system for handling requests, well equipped libraries, professors who devote more attention to students during consultations. Most of them prefer to study in private universities, however, their financial capabilities pose an obstacle to choose a private university, and as a result, most of them enrolled in public universities. Somehow the private universities has increased competition in higher education for more than a decade earlier (2001), taking into

account that students can now choose to enroll in public or private universities. Today in Macedonia operate 4 public universities, 5 private universities and 8 private universities, where students can choose to study.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Macedonia has so far made progress in improving the legal infrastructure on higher education, but thrust in establishing a functional system which will modify the knowledge, practice and skills of students with the labor market demands. Also, the academic structures need more time to fit legal changes and improve the quality of teaching in conformity with international standards.

To overcome abovementioned shortcomings we recommend:

- Introduction of the concept 'learning objectives and outcomes' in the curriculum, with focus on the practical skills and abilities for critical thinking, what the student knows and what they can do;
- Inclusion of experts from certain areas with the aim to develop the curriculum in accordance with the market needs;
- Introduction of the practice of visits to appropriate institutions/companies as part of the tutorials and writing of reports on the visit;
- Establishment of mechanisms for continuous revision of the curriculum by inclusion of the teaching staff, the students and the experts/practitioners;
- Instead of having internship every academic year, it would be more appropriate to have it during the last two academic years, but with longer duration and organized on a principle of guidance. It should envisage mandatory internship contracts, which should define the obligations of the students and the companies, introduction of a person responsible for the trainees in the companies who will coordinate the activities of the trainees and evaluate their work. The student could make an analysis on what he has learned and the differences of the practical work and the theory that is learned in class;
- It is essential to pay more attention to the relations to the students, specifically: Availability during the consultation periods; providing the emails of the professors and encouraging email communication; establishment of a guidance principle and taking more responsibility for the students' progress.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.mon.gov.mk](http://www.mon.gov.mk)

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