

Higher education in Albania

by Çlirim Duro

Higher education in Albania, as in all of Eastern Europe, changed in every aspect after 1990, following the alteration in political and economic systems.

Higher education in this post-communism epoch inherited a great number of problems, and the system was going to have to change in a variety of ways, including:

- decentralisation of an education system that was too far centralised
- shifting of the focus from quantity to quality
- importance of creating the opportunity for a qualitative education

Legislation

The first step was a new law. The Higher Education Law amended in 1994 was an intermediary link between the old situation and the future for Albanian higher education. Its impact was significant, as it generally reformed the entire higher education system. Some of the most important points were that:

- higher education will be offered by public higher education institutions (PHEIs) and non-public higher education institutions (NPHEIs)
- universities (HEIs) are instructional-scientific institutions with a mission to:
 - realise professional education and scientific shaping through teaching and scientific research
 - carry out scientific research and produce new scientists
- NPHEIs are teaching institutions, where scientific activity has an executive character and its main obligation is the realisation of professional education
- HEIs have academic freedom in teaching, scientific research and free circulation of ideas
- the evaluation of HEIs' quality and accreditation is carried out by the Accreditation Agency for Higher Education and Council of Accreditation. Their establishment and competences are determined by the Council of Ministers

However, the lack of freedom of university staff in electing their leaders was still a problem as this remained in the compe-

tence of the Ministry of Education and Science. In other areas this law changed many concepts and ideas for the future of higher education.

Another potential problem, however, was with the staff who would implement these changes. They came from the old system and had been moulded by those ideas and the way in which that system had functioned. It was very difficult to take the first steps towards the big adjustments expected, and to adopt the *avant-garde* position in implementing these fundamental changes.

Albania hadn't yet fully absorbed the results of this reform before it opened towards the West, and young people with a refreshed mentality and spirit began to make a difference in all areas of higher education. The academic staff showed they were capable of adaptation and reacted positively to the input of new ideas into the teaching and scientific processes, thanks to the help of many projects and contributions offered from European and American organisations and foundations, such as OSFA.

The new law for higher education amended in 1999 was an important step in the reforms, ratifying significant elements such as:

- HEIs are teaching/scientific institutions
- non-university HEIs are teaching/scientific institutions that prepare specialists with high qualifications
- an HEI elects its leading bodies and authorities
- the personnel of an HEI has the right to elect and be elected in the leading bodies and authorities according to the HEI's statute/charter
- the budget of the HEI is a specific report in the education budget and is administered by it according to rules predetermined in respective legal acts

So autonomy has been won, and made concrete through elections from the staff and its leaders. Looking at the law it seems that financial autonomy has been won too, but at the moment this remains just words and is still in the process of being realised, as Albania is encountering a lot of difficulties trying to reach EU standards.

Institutions

Albania currently has 13 PHEIs and 14 NPHEIs, and the trend is towards rapid growth. Seven of the public universities are located in Tirana, and the other six are located in different cities. The public

universities are older and financed mostly by the state, in addition to registration and other fees that they draw from students. Private universities are new, established after 2000 and self-financed by charging student fees determined by the institution itself, or other donations.

Bologna

The Bologna Declaration was a great help for Albania, as the education system was still in difficulty. The Declaration was made concrete in the academic year 2004–2005 by a decision of the Minister of Education and Science, making it possible for Albania to embrace the 3+2 system (Bachelor and Master), plus the later doctoral level. In the framework of global development and new entries quickly absorbed by the educational system, education continues in what is called lifelong learning and this is a new element that has recently been embedded.

Although there have been a lot of innovations in the context of the Bologna Declaration, and with much commitment from the staff, it should be emphasised that the process is difficult and there are many uncertainties.

The Bachelor level, now implemented, has proved in general to have been well conceived. From the results of the first courses completed at this level, there are data showing we are on the right path. The problem coming to light now concerns the new Master curricula, with the main question being: who can offer a Master? Which faculty or university? Criteria must be introduced, and it must be determined who meets these criteria and can therefore offer and cover this level of study. Of course, an important criterion is qualified staff.

However, the elements of the new system have been inserted more quickly than the law amended in 1999, introducing and implementing the system of credit points (ECTS). This system was introduced first in Tirana University in the framework of a TEMPUS Project.

By a special act of the Ministry of Education and Science at the end of the academic year 2004–2005 the list of marks (evaluation marks) that accompanies a diploma will express not only

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national evaluation by marks '4 to 10' but also show the evaluation in ECTS.

Quality

A very important aspect of the whole system is its quality, and for this reason a national accreditation system was created by law in 1999 with two significant components: the Accreditation Agency for Higher Education and the Accreditation Council. This system monitors and organises quality assessment across the entire higher education system in Albania. This structure has allowed a quick and effective introduction to universities and made obligatory the building up of an Internal Quality Assurance. First, a complete self-evaluation is undertaken by HEIs across the country, based on the procedures of evaluation defined by the Agency. An external evaluation is also part of the procedure and is implemented by the Agency and a group of external experts. In the context of the Bologna process, the external evaluators (experts) are mostly Albanian but the Agency has made it possible to involve European experts as well, European in general and experts from institutions where we are partners or by status 'candidate'.

These reports, after being approved by Council of Accreditation, are sent to the Ministry of Education and Science to be decided upon.

A follow-up plan has recently been presented by the Agency but it is still in the first implementation phase. It will make it possible to follow the development and improvement of an institution that has finished the evaluation procedure and is carrying out the 'duties' among the recommendations prepared by the Council. Some data about what is mentioned above can be found at the website of the Accreditation Agency www.aal.edu.al.

Trends and problems

Higher education in Albania is currently characterised by:

- a rapid increase in non-public HEIs
- attempts by HEIs to implement complete and integral financial autonomy
- a brain-drain problem

The student admission process was a problem. The system was a series of exams organised by the universities themselves,

and students complained about the subjectivity of the evaluation and corruption. This process has been totally changed. The Ministry of Education introduced a new concept: National/State Matura, where students pass through four exams (two are obligatory and two optional). This new procedure has resulted in greater efficiency, releasing universities from the tension with the students and the mentality of corruption attributed to it. All students compete equally in a fair and honest contest. Another problem is non-public HEIs. They are given a licence to operate after the fulfilment of certain conditions, supervised by a commission of the Ministry of Education and Science. Evaluation of quality and, later, accreditation of these non-public HEIs is done by the Accreditation Agency after they launch their first Diplomas in the market. The rapid increase in these universities is being watched anxiously. Only two of them are collaborating with non-public universities abroad (USA and Italy). It should be emphasised that in the evaluation of the Accreditation Agency of one of these two universities that do collaborate abroad, there was a high quality of teaching and staff, comparable to European universities.

In 2007 there will be a new law governing Albanian higher education that is expected to deal with the problems and defects of former laws and/or reflect the experience gained. The law has been drafted and is at the elaboration stage, with innovations and amendments being suggested by interested parties.

Because of some gaps in the former law, the government has made some amendments to the election processes, adding some new democratic elements. The High Council of Education was created as a consultative body that will help by offering opinions on the different problems and issues that concern the Albanian educational system. ■

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Skanderbeg – Albania's 15th century national hero



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