

## **Social and cultural dimension of the transformation of higher education in Albania**

***Kseanela Sotirofski, PhD, University "Aleksander Moisiu", Durres, Albania<sup>141</sup>***

***Mit`hat Mema, PhD, University "Aleksander Moisiu", Durres, Albania<sup>142</sup>***

***Ulpian Hoti, MA, University "Aleksander Moisiu", Durres, Albania<sup>143</sup>***

### **Abstract :**

The thesis of this article is that the main factors contributing to the need to rethink higher education institutions today are linked to the advent of the global age. Although Albania is not yet feeling the full force of the ensuing pressures, higher education here is likely to be affected very soon by globalization-related processes. Higher education all over the world, including Albania, is no longer the unique part of the public sector that it used to be, either in explicit political declarations, in public perceptions, or in practical terms. Higher education is doubly affected by the local post-1989 transformations and by more profound and more long-lasting global transformations . To neglect either of the two levels of analysis is to misunderstand a decade of failed attempts to reform higher education systems in the country.

The main purpose of this study is to carry out the main issues related to the social and cultural dimensions of the transformation process of the Albanian Higher Education and their impact to the globalization process. The transformation of the higher education system consists on reflecting the changes that are taking place in our society, strengthening the values and practices of our new democracy, redressing the past inequalities, serving a new social order, meeting the national needs and responding to new realities and opportunities. Higher education plays a central role in the social, cultural and economic development of modern societies. In Albania today, the challenge is to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities.

A brief summary of related literature review will be presented. Among all traditional factors that determine social and cultural dimensions of transformation process and it's positive impact, it is thought that government politics related to higher education, the students' choice chance, the existence of a lot of universities that can be accessed, the changing curricula, the

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<sup>141</sup> Dr. Kseanela Sotirofski. Dean of Faculty of Professional Studies, University "A. Moisiu", Durres, Albania

<sup>142</sup> Prof. As. Dr. Mit`hat Mema, Rector, University "A. Moisiu", Durres, Albania

<sup>143</sup> Ulpian Hoti, MA, Chancellor, University "A. Moisiu", Durres, Albania

students exchange, the openness to the world are important and all the factors above affect the social and cultural dimensions of higher education transformation process in Albania.

This paper also attempts to assess the likely evolution of Albanian higher education social and cultural transformation and its effects in the future, based on the thought that the transformation process to a global world has not yet been completed and transitional dynamics and other global factors will influence further evolution of these dimensions.

*Key Words: cultural, social, transformation, higher education, globalization.*

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the necessity of grounding current discussions about higher education reforms in Albania in a wider context of global social, economic, and cultural change. The article is built on the thesis that any thinking about reforms in higher education in general, outside a particular context of reforming the whole public sector remains incomplete. Similarly, any thinking about the institution of the university in particular while disregarding the past context of its modern, nation-state-oriented, social role, place, and function, provided by the old model in the new post-national global age, remains incomplete.

### **New Forces Versus Old Forces**

Regarding to higher education, several working assumptions can be made. First of all, the transformation of higher education seems inevitable worldwide, as much in the wealthy OECD countries, including the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as in the developing countries, the forces behind change being global in nature. These forces are similar, even though their current influence varies from country to country and from region to region<sup>144</sup>.

The main forces that are driving the transformation of higher education today are old forces (governmental and public pressure for transparency and accountability, the focus on costs, effectiveness, productivity, and quality assurance, etc.) and new ones (new providers of higher education, rapid advances in technology, and changing social demands for renewable skills in the global age). The old forces call only for the changing of policies, but the new forces may require new ways of thinking about policy scholarship and policy making as well.

The forces of globalization are of primal importance, yet they appear to be underestimated in current higher education policy and research. These forces are undoubtedly

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<sup>144</sup> OECD. *Education and the Economy in a Changing Society*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1989.

bound to change the nature of the academic enterprise to a degree that today seems almost unimaginable. In order to demonstrate the power of the forces of globalization of higher education that are transforming higher education, it is important to evoke the political, economic, and social contexts of globalization-driven transformations in thinking about the nation-state and the welfare state.<sup>145</sup> (Kwiek, 2000).

In the American context, new forces for change mean new providers, new technologies, and a new society. Here the whole globalized underpinning of higher education transformations is already taken for granted (Newman, 1999).<sup>146</sup> In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, however, these forces need to be supplemented with more basic ones, those of globalization and internationalization. In this context, an area that is much more dependent on the European political and economic scene, especially in the case of the countries about to enter the European Union, these issues in connection with higher education reforms may still seem irrelevant (Strange, 1996).<sup>147</sup> The point made in this article is that the most powerful forces to affect higher education in the country are the new forces, not the old forces with which European higher education research and policy, at both national and European level, seem to be predominantly concerned

Globally, we are on the threshold of a revolution in thinking about higher education. Higher education is asked to adapt to new societal needs, to be more responsive to the world around it, to be more market, performance, and student oriented, to be more cost effective, accountable to its stakeholders, as well as competitive with other providers. Traditional higher educational institutions seem challenged and under assault all over the world by new teaching and research institutions that claim to do the same job better and cheaper. The traditional basic structure of higher education seems unable to cope with growing and unprecedented workforce requirements in the West, especially in America. Locally, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, academics are not prepared for these global challenges (Altbach, 2001).<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> KWIEK, M. "The Nation- State, Globalization and the Modern Institution of the University", *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Studies* (December 2000).

<sup>146</sup> NEWMAN, F. "Intellectual Skills in the Information Age", *The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World*, A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University, 1999, [www.futuresproject.org](http://www.futuresproject.org).

<sup>147</sup> STRANGE, S. *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>148</sup> ALTBACH, P.G. "Higher Education and the WTO: Globalization Run Amok", *International Higher Education* 23 (Spring 2001).

## ***The Global Context***

The public policy of higher education needs to be especially aware of the global context of current worldwide transformation. It is certainly not sufficient to understand today that reformed institutions are certainly needed. The point is to perceive why it is that they need to be changed and what the role of the state, the public services it provides, including higher education, will become. The message of this article could also be that it is impossible to understand transformations in higher education today without understanding the concurrent transformations of the social world, including transformations of the state and of citizenship in the global age.

As one of the most striking features of the new world is its increasingly global nature, neither policy makers nor policy scholars in higher education can ignore the huge social, economic, political, and cultural consequences of globalization. What is often recommended by public policy analysts today is the privatization of public higher education in Europe following the introduction of new laws on higher education. Privatization is understood as a gradual process where by higher education leaves the public sector of purely state-supported services and moves towards greater self-sustainability. The degree of privatization may, however, vary. In a new social and political environment introduced by theories and practices of globalization, it is not only the World Bank, OECD, and IMF, from among transnational organizations (see OECD, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1998; World Bank, 1994, 1997),<sup>149</sup> that are extremely interested in stimulating new varieties of higher education on a global scale. As Philip G. Altbach<sup>150</sup> observes in his recent article in *International Higher Education* (2001): 'with the growing commercialization of higher

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<sup>149</sup> OECD. *Universities Under Scrutiny*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1987.  
OECD. *Education and the Economy in a Changing Society*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1989.

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WORLD BANK. *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1994.

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<sup>150</sup> ALTBACH, P.G. "Higher Education and the WTO: Globalization Run Amok", *International Higher Education* 23 (Spring 2001).

education, the values of the market place have intruded onto the campus`. The conclusion of the attitude Altbach summarizes, clearly favoured by transnational organizations, is the following: “in this context a logical development is the privatization of public universities— the selling of knowledge products, partnering with corporations, as well as increases in student fees”.

The main factors contributing to the need to rethink higher education institutions today are connected with the advent of the global age and with globalization pressures. Although the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not yet feeling these pressures in higher education, they are soon likely to be affected by globalization-related processes.

Also, there will be a clear shift from the question, “what is it that higher education needs from society” to the opposite question, “what it that society needs from higher education is” (Newman, 1999).<sup>151</sup>

Globalization is the political and economic reality with which the countries of the region will have to cope. It will not go away; it will come to the region and stay, as Jan Sadlak (1998)<sup>152</sup> rightly remarks (without, however, making reference to Central Europe): “The frank acknowledge ment that globalization has become a permanent feature of our social, economic, and cultural space is essential in order to take advantage of what it can offer as well as to avoid the perils it may involve.”

Thus the re-invention of higher education in the region should be accompanied by both conceptualizations and activities of the academy itself. Otherwise unavoidable and necessary changes will most likely be imposed from the outside. The world is changing radically, and there are no indications that higher education institutions will be spared the consequences. They will most likely have to change radically too. The academy must start thinking about its future, drawing on its human resources. It would be useful for the academic community to have a comparative view of three legal, economic, and cultural contexts in which it used to operate, currently operates, and will operate: the first being the 1980s (the communist period), the second being the 1990s (the transition period),

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<sup>151</sup> NEWMAN, F. “Intellectual Skills in the Information Age”, *The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World*, A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University, 1999, [www.futuresproject.org](http://www.futuresproject.org) .

<sup>152</sup> SADLAK , J. “Globalization and Concurrent Challenges for Higher Education”, *The Globalization of Higher Education*. London: Open University Press, 1998.

and the third being the opening of the new century in which changes to come are unavoidable (Kwiek, 2001).<sup>153</sup> Although it is necessary to realize that “things will never be the same”, it is also necessary to attempt to envisage how they might actually be.

### ***Reformulation of the educational role of the welfare state***

Following what was stated above; the main global factors contributing to the transformation of higher education can be summarily labeled as “globalization”. This be put into three separate categories: first, the collapse of the crucial role of the nation-state in current social and economic development, with its vision of higher education as a national treasure contributing to national consciousness; second, the reformulation of the functions of the welfare state, including new scope for public-sector activities to be funded by the state; and third, the invasion of the economic rationality/corporate culture into the whole public sector worldwide. The second are global problems for which global solutions must be sought by global organizations interested in higher education. Moreover, the following other factors are determining a new situation for higher education including: new technologies, new student bodies (increasingly diversified ages, returning and working students, learners involved in life-long learning), new higher education providers, new increasingly global student expectations, and increasingly competitive, market-oriented, success-greedy social environments, and phenomena (The Futures Project, 2000).<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> KWIEK, M. “Globalization and Higher Education”, *Higher Education in Europe* 261 (2001): 27 –38 .

<sup>154</sup> THE FUTURES PROJECT: POLICY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CHANGING WORLD. “ Policies for Higher Education in the Competitive World”, A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University, 2000, <http://www.futuresproject.org>

### ***Public higher education under scrutiny***

Thus another thesis is that public higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe will be increasingly under public scrutiny. The following reasons are the most important of them. First, there is the wide spread public perception of the academic community as still being immune from public criticism, non-reforming, non-transparent, and non-accountable to society—hence, decreasing public support accompanied by declining public trust in higher education institutions generally. Second, the public funding of higher education is, in general, decreasing. There are other pressing new societal needs that require high levels of funding (Hovey, 2000).<sup>155</sup>

The increasing public scrutiny is also the consequence of the enlightening mission of higher education. Finally, two different reasons need to be mentioned. In the global, increasingly post-national age, the national pride that used to guide the public attitude to higher education is not of prime importance any more.

### ***Failure of higher education reforms***

What is important and to be understood is that in the past decade of mainly failed higher education reforms, the social and economic surroundings have changed dramatically. The state has sharply reduced the level of funding of public higher education and has begun to reform the public sector generally (Tomusk, 2000).<sup>156</sup> And what is extremely important in thinking about higher education in particular (and the public sector in general) have occurred worldwide. It appears that worldwide tendencies in a rapidly globalizing world can no longer be disregarded, especially in those regions that are undergoing vast social and economic transformations. Thus, again, it is important to view the changing academic surroundings and the current problems of higher education in a more global context, for it is in this context that

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<sup>155</sup> HOVEY, H.A. *State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support*. Washington, DC: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. 2000.

<sup>156</sup> TOMUSK, V. *The Blinding Darkness of the Enlightenment: Towards the Understanding of Post State-Socialist Higher Education in Eastern Europe*. Turku: University of Turku Press, 2000.

higher education systems here will be operating sooner or later (Kwiek&Finikov, 2001).<sup>157</sup>

Thus, again, it is important to view the changing academic surroundings and the current problems of higher education in a more global context, for it is in this context that higher education systems here will be operating sooner or later. No clear and consensual model for the reform of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe has been found after almost a decade of permanent reforms or attempts at reform. The models provided are divergent; the very world is in the process of being made. The exact features of the global world being entered are still unknown; hence, the nature of higher education of the future is equally unknown (Scott, 1999).<sup>158</sup>

So far as reforms are concerned, the options are as follows: first, a “business as usual” attitude, *i.e.*, the rejection of any awareness of a new situation (higher education institutions themselves, faculty, and management) and hence no important reforms attempted (governments).

Second, the beginning of reforms in very broad terms, followed by a reforming higher education law itself. Or third, the beginning of reforming higher education without an awareness of the new world into which Albania will be entering, with its new global challenges, including that of reform as a never-ending process. The decisive factor will not be politics, media campaigns, or agreement between the state and higher education institutions themselves, but public pressure in a new sense: the pressure of consumers, *i.e.*, students and their families. In the worst scenario, the turning point will be a near collapse of higher education systems.

The issue of free higher education guaranteed by constitutions in certain Central and Eastern European countries is a hot political issue. For the faculty, the statusquo seems acceptable, for it is known. Reforms and their consequences are unknown, *i.e.*, potentially threatening. The general direction in favour of greater accountability and heavier work loads (accepted as a future reality) is evident.

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<sup>157</sup> KWIEK, M., & FINIKOV, T. *Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe: Poland and Ukraine*. Ki ev: Taxon Publishing House, 2001.

<sup>158</sup> SCOTT, P. “Globalization and the University”, *CRE— Action 115* (1999).



Generally, the faculty reacts passive mentality, a feature inherited from communist times, an inability to adapt to new, revolutionary changes as a result of systemic reforms and age factor, for the average age of professors.

Finally, on the part of transnational institutions that are traditionally viewed as supporting reforms in the region, there is still only light pressure for reforms in public higher education (Slaughter&Cerlie, 1997).<sup>159</sup>

Reform will come as the result of a long process given that the main stakeholders involved, the state and higher education institutions, are unwilling/unable to proceed with reforms. But as the result of public debate and business community requirements for the labour market, as well as supranational recommendations to cut public expenses generally, the state and the institutions (faculty) will be forced to introduce far-reaching changes in order to avoid the loss of social credibility.

### **Conclusion:**

Given that because of the current global ideological climate and powerful globalization pressures public higher education institutions do not have much of a chance to avoid the processes of privatization (in the long run), they should be well aware of current takes rather than ignoring the mina “business as usual” attitude. In order to avoid being merely an object of future transformations, the academic world, in the current situation, should understand the general direction of the changes affecting the institutions and try to influence the transformation. They should participate in the creation of, and in the debates about, the legal contexts of the functioning of higher education and mobilize themselves along with the personnel of think tanks in order to lobby for the best choices available. They should form coalitions of experts, legislators, and academics in order to influence both the state and public opinion in favour of their views, make use of international

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<sup>159</sup> SLAUGHTER, S., & LESLIE, L. L. *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

recommendations when reasonable, but oppose them when not, and always remember that the old, golden era of the academy will never return.

The single most important recommendation for the state and legislative bodies is to begin (or rather intensify) their work on new laws on higher education that would introduce means for the gradual privatization of higher education rather than trying to block the process so that the decomposition of public higher education institutions can be stopped.

It is also of vital importance, nowadays, to be able to keep a thin balance between looking backward and looking forward, between taking the past (the modern idea of the university) and taking the future as points of reference in discussing the condition of higher education in the region. It is important not to be retroactive and past oriented. The world is in a period of history in which the traditional, philosophy-inspired, nation-state oriented, and well fare-state supported, modern university, for a variety of reasons, is no longer culturally, socially, and economically acceptable. These are facts that cannot be changed.

The future of higher education is taking shape right before our eyes, and it is the task of the academic community not only to analyze the transformations but to influence them as much as possible.

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