

Higher education and research in Albania in the way of achieving the objectives of Bologna declaration

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The aim of this article is to examine how a uniform higher education system adapted to fulfil the European initiatives in higher education and more general European integration process through transforming national policies and legislation. The article focuses on the changes made in the higher education system analysing their diversity, the way of their implementation and the impact they had in the quality of the system. The paper ultimately provides an overview of identified knowledge gaps and presents the discussion of a number of higher education challenges towards implementation of Bologna Process. How did the higher education system in Albania face Bologna process and was it really prepared for the challenging transformations ahead? The article goes through the main stages that changed the higher education system in post-communist Albania, by giving an overview of the system before and after Bologna “revolution” in higher education system. Reforms have been undertaken in Albanian higher education system during these years, where most of them have been initiated in the frame of implementation of Bologna Declaration by expanding, redesigning and re-accommodating the higher education institutions.

Key words: Higher education, research, autonomy, university, Albania.

Introduction

Albania located to the south-east side of Balkans was (self)-isolated up until the 1990s (Zgaga, P. 2010) and can be seen as a special case of extreme isolationism. It became an independent country in 1912 but due to historic circumstances the development of a unified national education system only started after the First World War (Zgaga, P. 2010). The Higher Education system in Albania was founded in 1957 with the establishment of the State University of Tirana, based upon a Polytechnic Institute that was founded in 1951. The Academy of Science in Tirana was opened in 1972. It was the only university in the country until 1990, although some new institutes or their branches were also

established in this period. Later, in 1991, the engineering and technical sciences faculties were separated off Tirana University and transferred under the Tirana Polytechnic University, while Agriculture Sciences Faculties were passed under Tirana Agricultural University. Meanwhile new public universities were established, located in different regions of the country.

During the transition period the education system suffered huge damages. Beyond the chaotic processes and social implosion, the Albanian economic and political transition has been strongly marked with the idea of “return to Europe” (Héritier, 2005)¹.

During the last 10-15 years, Albanian higher education policy development has been much influenced by two major European initiatives in higher education – the Bologna Process and the EU’s Lisbon Strategy. The influence of European initiatives on national policy making is closely linked, on the one hand, with the aspirations of Albania to joining the European Union (EU) and on the other hand with the desire for Europeanization of higher education, where Bologna Declaration paved the way of reforming Albanian higher education and creating the European Higher Education Area.

In 2003 Albania signed the Bologna Declaration at the Berlin Ministers Conference and Bologna related reforms started to take place, including changes in legislation, less often, changes in funding arrangements, as well as changes in curricula and study programmes. Since then the Albanian higher education system is in the process of changing in order to satisfy the principles of the Bologna Process. The system is in transition from a “top-down” approach to the provision of higher education to a more “bottom-up” approach implicit in the Bologna Process, with autonomy-with-accountability accorded to the universities².

¹ Council of the European Union “Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part” Brussels, 22 May 2006, article 1, par. 2: Amongst the aims of the association is to support the efforts of Albania to complete the transition into a functioning market economy, to promote harmonious economic relations and develop gradually a free trade area between the Community and Albania. Article 6 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement “The Association shall be implemented progressively and shall be fully realised over a transitional period of a maximum of ten years, divided into two successive stages”. Based in this article the transition period is expected to last at least till 2016.

² Law no. 7810, dated 06.04.1994, “On the Higher Education in the Republic of Albania”, (as amended) Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

During the transition period, the legislative reforms done in the higher education system have been consistent with the performance and progress of the country. This entire period can be considered as a period of legislating and for study purpose we have split it in three phases, 1) The early transition; 2) Toward joining the Bologna Process; and 3) Bologna process implementation. The key changes that have happened in the field of higher education during each phase include:

1- The early transition

At the beginning of and during the 1990s, legislators chiefly focused on the general framework which had been profoundly challenged everywhere by the overturn of the political system and by the economic conditions. So, this phase is predominantly characterized by technical adaptations of the traditional system – in both legal and value terms –to the new political and economic order.

The legislative reform of Higher Education occurred in 1994³ with the approval of the law for higher education which aimed at the detachment of the higher education from the monist system. (DAAD 2010)

2- Toward joining the Bologna Process

The *second phase of legislating* occurred at the beginning of the 2000s. On one hand, it was an obvious task of the ‘post-communist’ period and ‘reintegration into Europe’; on the other hand, it was directly connected to Europeanisation processes and in particular to the Bologna Process, given that Albania signed the Bologna Declaration in 2003 at the Berlin Ministers Conference. The legislating agenda of the second phase was stronger, at least at first sight: the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has provided the conceptual basis for the modernization of higher education – the basis that had been lacking before in Albania.

³ Council of the European Union “Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part” Brussels, 22 May 2006, article 1, par. 2: Amongst the aims of the association is to support the efforts of Albania to complete the transition into a functioning market economy, to promote harmonious economic relations and develop gradually a free trade area between the Community and Albania.

Article 6 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement “The Association shall be implemented progressively and shall be fully realised over a transitional period of a maximum of ten years, divided into two successive stages”. Based in this article the transition period is expected to last at least till 2016.

In 1999, a new law for Higher Education was approved by Parliament focusing on giving greater autonomy to the governance of the universities and on new provisions for private higher education⁴ preparing in this way the premises for the implementation of Bologna principles and standards.

3- “Bologna process implementation”

After the official accession, legislative changes were launched mostly through amendments to relevant laws. They were initiated from top-down and performed in a short time since they were part of the European higher education agenda. It was as a balance of the desire for integration of Albanian higher education system into the international space and the necessary reforms which needed to be implemented at home. Albanian higher education entered a new qualitative phase with the Bologna system implementation. The signing of the Bologna Declaration demanded great transformation of its very foundations. Its implementation has had achievements but encountered difficulties as well. Further reformation was required yet in order to meet the standards adopted by the other countries of the Bologna Process, making it comparable and compatible with the rest of the European system of higher education.

Another legislative reform occurred in 2007 with the approval of another law on higher education, which aimed to modernize the higher education system, enhancing quality, ensuring quality of high school product, full financial autonomy and academic freedom⁵.

Therefore, in this study we will try to assess the higher education system before and after the implementation of the Bologna Declaration, regarding the organization of study system, the mobility of students, the way the research evolved and what characterizes the outcome of this comprehensive process. The analyses of the higher education system before implementing the Bologna Declaration will serve to identify the features of this extremely standardized system, in contrast to the diversity required by the market economy. Through the analyses of the key documents of higher education in Albania the

⁴ Law no. 8461, dated 25.02.1999, “On the Higher Education in the Republic of Albania”, (as amended), Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

⁵ Law no. 9741, dated 21.05.2007 “On the Higher Education in the Republic of Albania”, (as amended), Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

reasons why the implementation of Bologna's principles were necessary for the further development of Albania will be identified in a process which is not only connected with legislative changes but mainly with practical implementation of principles and related policy lines.

In this context, we put forward the following research questions: How did the standardized Albanian Higher Education System face the diversification imposed by the Bologna process? To what extent does the diversification of the higher education system in Albania comply with the standards set by the Bologna Declaration, regarding the legislation, the designation of institutional governance, the implementation of universities' autonomy associated with improvement in quality? The answers to these questions can be useful to better understand the development of higher education system through the analyses of its characteristics during the last 20 years, the internal and European policies adopted in the sector, as well as the basic principles where the system intends to rely on.

The study follows the methodology of key documents analysis (legislation, strategies, regulations, international treaties and conventions) which will cover an inclusive examination of the normative framework, the policies undertaken in the field, and the obligations arising from the international agreements ratified by Albania in the field of higher education for evaluating the system of higher education during its way of transforming in compliance with the European standards.

The article begins in its first section with a brief analysis of the organization of the higher education system before and after implementation of the Bologna Declaration during the time period of 1994-2014, taking into consideration the relevant amendments of HE law, with focus on three cornerstones 1994, 1999 and 2007 that correspond to the undertaken reforms in the Albanian higher education system.

To facilitate the understanding of the higher education reforms throughout this period, the article continues in the second section with a detailed analysis of the changes which occurred in different components of the system, to reflect clearly the process of transformation of the HE system from a very standard system toward a diversified one. The second part of the study is linked with particular elements of the higher education

system and is focused on identifying the changes which occurred in the management structure of the universities, the redefining of the study programs, the changes of teaching methods, and the transformation of the general learning environment for students as well as for the academic staff.

The article closes with some findings and conclusions regarding the adaptation of the Bologna process as a diversified European policy in a rigid higher education system such as Albania, taking into consideration the way the Bologna standards were implemented in the country.

Referring to the sources used for the preparation of this article, the study goes through the analyses of the national legislation in higher education and research adopted by the Albanian parliament from 1992 to 2014, the international agreements and reports done during these years for Albania, such as progress reports reported by the European Commission, as well as different studies done by international experts for the development of the higher education system in Albania.

Theoretical framework

The Bologna process is a European reform dated from 1998, aiming at creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world. The process intends to facilitate and offer greater compatibility and comparability between the diverse higher education systems and institutions across Europe, by enhancing their quality and by providing tools to connect national educational systems.

During the first ten years, the goal of the Bologna Process was exceedingly ambitious; it planned to remake the face of higher education in the forty-six member countries and form the so-called European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the year 2010. (Terry, L. 2008).

It was undoubtedly an ambitious goal because the state members were of different historical and economic backgrounds, which affected the achievement of Bologna declarations' goals.

The Bologna Declaration's introductory part stresses that a 'Europe of knowledge' is an irreplaceable factor of social and human growth as it fosters European citizenship, empowers citizens with the necessary competencies for working together, and with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space. In the third paragraph, the Declaration openly refers to SEE: 'The importance of education and educational cooperation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount, the more so in view of the situation in South East Europe.' (Zgaga, P. 2010)

The signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 by the Ministers of Education from 29 European countries marked a major step in the integration of education, in general, and tertiary education, in particular (Field's article 2003 as cited in Kola, I. 2011) in the EU and more widely in Europe. The Bologna Declaration⁶ aimed at removing obstacles to student and graduate mobility within the signatory countries. (Kola, I. 2011, p.76)

In this frame, Albania has considered the Bologna Process as a way to facilitate and accelerate the European Integration of the country by trying to expand, to modernize and to make more flexible the higher education system. In order to implement the principles of the Bologna process, real changes have happened in the higher education system which have been consistent also with European integration process. These changes affected the overall system of higher education, gradually starting in 2003, by implementing with major efforts the objectives developed during the Bologna process.

The process of the achievement of European standards has faced some delicate issues that have needed quick solutions, for the tertiary education to gradually: (a) integrate with the European education networks (Bologna Process); (b) adapt to the market demands; (c) have the appropriate institutional autonomy; and, (d) become diversified (Ministry of Education and Science, Annual Statistical Report of Education 2002-2003). (Kola, I. 2011 p. 73)

⁶ Bologna Declaration For a full text of the declaration see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/990719BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.PDF

The progression of the higher education system in Albania during the first decade of the post-communist period was slow without any clear vision for its future development. The appearance of the higher education system was more similar to the eastern ideology even though the political will was towards the western platform. According to Palomba and Vodopivec (2001) in Albania's formerly planned economy, the quality of education was targeted toward the productive needs of a controlled economy and the ideological and social requirements of a socialist state, and this created problems during the transition. So, in the moment of participation as a member state in the Bologna process, Albania was far from the standards which sustained the higher education system in other member countries. According to Caddick (2008), with the membership of Bologna Declaration:

part of the problem is that some European countries, particularly those in Southeast Europe and the old Eastern Bloc, do not yet have the experience, resources or national discussions to fully implement the Bologna reforms at this stage. Furthermore, the Bologna is a voluntary reform—there are no international treaties or legally binding agreements—which means that there are no official incentives or punishments to encourage or force countries to implement Bologna properly.

The Bologna process is not based on an intergovernmental treaty. Even though the documents that are adopted by the ministers responsible for the higher education of the countries participating in the process are not legally binding documents, the free will of every participating country has been enough to embrace the principles of the Bologna Process for making them part of their higher education communities.

The more evolved the principles of Bologna, the more rapid the reforms made in Albania's higher education system, the greater the impact on the universities, academic staff and students. The initial results of the efforts were the changing of either the curricula of study programs by introducing the cycles of studies (3+2), the system of credits (ECTS) and diploma supplement or the postgraduate research qualification system by obtaining firstly "Master" diploma associated later with scientific career, which began with doctoral dissertation and ended by obtaining the "professor" title. The evaluation of study programs was taken seriously by strengthening through legislative procedures the role of Agency of Accreditation in Albania which until 2003-2004 had played an

insignificant role. Moreover, two more principles were taken into consideration regarding the recognition of degrees and periods of studies⁷ and social dimension of the higher education. Both of them initiated the expansion of higher education system by accepting and recognizing studies completed abroad by students and by creating the available conditions for students' participation in the decision-making process of higher education, in senates, council of faculties, councils of students, as the first steps towards acceptance of students' contribution in higher education system. The Europeanization of the higher education system in Albania is not limited to the signing of the Bologna declaration in 2003 but it is strengthened by the ratification of the Stabilization and Association Agreement⁸ where the objectives of the Bologna declaration were one of the key priorities of the higher education system stipulated in this agreement.

Profound as the implications for Albania's HE were, the effects of joining the Bologna Process go much deeper. They define the future of Albania's place in the EU and beyond in terms of the country's economic, political, and cultural development, as well as its capacity to integrate in regional and global-scale processes (Kola, I. 2011, 204-207). According to Vukasovic (2012) one could also argue that participation in Bologna can be seen as an entrance point for non-EU countries into the EU higher education policy arena.

For implementing these principles, the Albanian universities are going through rapid reforms. The National Strategy for Higher Education (SKALA 2008)⁹ clearly defines the priorities of the development of Higher Education in coming years focusing mostly in:

1. Expansion of the system to meet the needs of the country and provide higher education opportunities for all who will follow it and be able to benefit from it.
2. Ensuring diversity in higher education, in line with the requirements of the future development needs of Albania.

⁷ Law No.8834, dated 22.11.2001, "On the ratification of the "Convention on the Recognition of higher education Qualifications in Europe "(Lisbon, 1997) Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

⁸ Council of the European Union (2006) Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Albania, of the Other Part. Brussels, 22 May 2006

⁹ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania (2008) Strategjia Kombëtare për Arsimin e Lartë (SKALA) 2008-2013 ('National Strategy for Higher Education' 2008-2013) [Online] Available at: www.aaal.edu.al [Accessed on 28th August 2015]

3. Improvement of the quality of teaching and learning through the continuous development of academic staff and through fostering a culture of quality.
4. Helping the public universities to improve their governance by increasing their autonomy - conditional on adequate management, accountability and transparency.
5. Development of methods for public funding that encourages the entire system to achieve the objectives.

Although the dynamics of higher education reforms under the Bologna process are so intriguing, it is needed to take into consideration two purposes of higher education such as to help the social development of the country as well as to supply highly skilled manpower. According to the analysis done by Hatakenaka and Thompson (2006) the rate of expansion in HE systems should not proceed without curricular (and other) reforms to modernize the content of teaching to meet the likely future labour market needs.

Furthermore, our analysis will focus on the reforms that have been undertaken in the higher education system, highlighting the impact that they have had in the system and the problems faced during their implementation.

The analyses of the organization of the higher education system before and after implementation of Bologna Declaration, focusing in three cornerstones 1994, 1999 and 2007

After 1991¹⁰ the vision of the higher education system in Albania was very limited, since the country had just emerged from the monist system and the transition period revealed the necessity for creation of senior specialists to support the process of the transformation of the country into a European one. The period 1990 to 1994 is characterized mainly by the dominance of the state and by a poor autonomy of higher education institutions. At the beginning there were only two universities and three academies located in Tirana, while Pedagogical and Agricultural Institutes were spread in regional cities. During 1992-1993, the Higher Education Institutions outside Tirana were transformed into Universities by a decision of the Ministry of Education, without being subject of any process of

¹⁰ The year when the first democratic elections were held in Albania after the monist system

evaluation of academic standards. The changing of their status brought the separation of these institutions from the tradition of several decades as well as from the profiling, so much needed in the trade market economy (The Final Report on Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform, 2014).¹¹

The law of 1994 “On higher education in Republic of Albania” was the first law on higher education approved during the transition period. The higher education system was centrally organized where the standardization was the predominant element regarding the institutions, the study programs offered by the universities, as well as the administration and management of universities. Academic freedom was perceived as freedom in teaching, research and the free flow of ideas while autonomy was connected with the right of the academic staff to elect the governing bodies of the universities and the right to collaborate with foreign universities upon the approval of Ministry of Education. In the years 1994 to 1999, the higher education system was characterized by the expansion of the study programs of several universities, losing in this way their profile as well as their features as public entities. Regardless of the expansion of Universities, their study programs were not connected to the economic development as well as to the request for expertise in certain professions, according to the Final Report on the Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform – (2014).

After the first decade of higher education in post dictatorial society, there was an indisputable need for new arrangements in the higher education system in accordance with the new vision of the country. In 1999, the higher education Law changed some aspects of the system – though in a rather incomplete and inconsistent way. (Hatakenaka, S. and Thompson, Q. 2006).

The section below presents a detail analysis of the development of the system from the perspective of its main topics that deal with the university’s autonomy, organization and size of the higher education institutions, study programs, governance, management and finance, evaluation and accreditation, scientific research.

¹¹ Final Report on the Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform – July 2014. Available at: http://www.arsimi.gov.al/files/userfiles/reformaalksh/Raport_Final_Ministria_Arsimit.pdf

The poor autonomy and the interference of the government in the higher education system

The control exercised by the government on the universities was very high, starting from the election of the authorities, continuing with the approval by Ministry of Education of all the main activities and documents developed by them. The government used to have a strong position in the system, especially with regard to the regulation of financial and administration procedures, studies structure and the organizational framework, knowledge worker workload, student enrolment size, tuition fees, the establishment of new study programs, and so forth. (Nelaj, D. 2009 pp 5).

The Ministry of Education approved the administrative structure of the universities, the number of the academic and administrative staff, the academic and scientific norms of work, the statutes of the universities, the admission quotas in higher education institutions, the collaboration of the universities with foreign universities, and above all the process of election of authorities and governing bodies. The elected rector in this way, became the delegate of the government to the university. All these measures indicate a very limited autonomy for the higher education institutions.

During 1994-1999 the existence of the National Committee of the Higher Education Institutions, as a consultative body near the Council of Ministers for the higher education system constituted a total interference of the government in every decision-making process of universities. The main functions of this organ consisted of the proposals done for the Council of Ministers for the main issues concerning the higher education process, such as the opening or closure of faculties or research institutes, the classification of the academics and research staff, the designing of national criteria for curriculum and study programs of the faculties. The structure of the higher education system until 1999 had remained very centralized and the university autonomy was very limited especially with regard to financial issues (OECD 2002).

While the reform introduced by the Higher Education Law of 1999 aimed to bring greater autonomy to the governance of universities. The points of view for this new autonomy were related firstly to the election process of the governing bodies and authorities in higher education institutions, where the university staff had the right to choose and to be chosen in university governing bodies, in accordance with the statutes of the university.

Secondly the law of 1999 recognized the possibility of universities to determine the fields of teaching and research as well as the possibility to conclude agreements with foreign universities and international associations for improvement of learning processes as well as the personnel without the consent from the Ministry of Education. Thirdly, the autonomy touched at first sight even the budget of the higher education institutions, where each of the higher education institutions' budgets were considered as a separate item in the budget for education. But the law didn't recognize that an increase in university autonomy needed to be balanced by both increased accountability to the main stakeholders and clearer responsibilities required by the management processes. The Law was unclear or even silent about the implementation of the given autonomy which was not associated with management changes needed to make the autonomy effective. The Law was also unclear even about the role of the Rector and of the Senate in the conditions of a greater autonomy.

There is no reference to management processes in the 1999 Law and so little attention has been paid to developing them – which is one reason why the universities were not ready for any further autonomy.

The concept of autonomy of higher education institutions was broadly stipulated in the 2007 law by giving HEIs the right:

- to self-govern through organizing internal structures and their activities,
- to draft and develop study programmes as well as scientific projects;
- to determine acceptance criteria for the students in different study programmes;
- to gather funds and to use them according to legal dispositions as well as the right to enter into independent agreements with the government or other legal entities.

The autonomy sanctioned in 2007 Law comes as a result of the Bologna Declaration which outlines:

“This is of the highest importance, given that Universities independence and autonomy ensure that higher education and research systems continuously adapt to changing needs, society's demands and advances in scientific knowledge”.

The 2007 Law introduced for the first time the concept of a governing board or as it's called "administrative board", as a collegial decision-making body which supervises and controls the activities of the institution of higher education, related to administrative, financial, economic management and its properties.

Although further steps are taken towards the autonomy and independence from the government, clear border-lines between the political system and the higher education system in Albania are yet to be drawn. The Rector of a public university is nominated through a broad internal electorate but is appointed by the President of the Republic. Similarly, the chief administrative officer (Chancellor) is nominated by the Rector but is appointed by the Minister of Education and Science. It appears that ministerial appointments are made by a university's Council of Administration as well as for a university's Senate.

These procedures need to be reconciled with the autonomy of universities and accreditation bodies required in the Bologna process. Otherwise the Albanian higher education sector would be possibly faced by large scale personnel changes after governmental elections. (DAAD 2010).

The organization and size of the higher education institutions

From 1991 till 2002 the higher education system hasn't experienced any significant change regarding the vision, the organization and the profile apart from the changes of the first years (transformation of the institutes into Universities).

Starting from 2005, the most visible feature of the higher education system is *massification*. There was an increase in participation rates already in 2005 to 2013, connected with a variety of specific reasons that derive from the change of cultural patterns and social ambitions via unemployment and migrations to new national policies addressing the 'upcoming knowledge society' etc. (Zgaga, P. et al. (2013)

Another easily visible feature of these developments is *the growth in the number of higher education institutions*— public and in particular private.

In the period of 1992 to 1999, the higher education system in Albania included Universities and non-university Higher Education Schools. Universities were focused on the professional education and scientific formation of students through teaching and research, offering at least 4-year study programmes, while non-university Higher Education Schools had the target to prepare the specialists towards vocational education, offering at least 2-year study programmes. There were 8 universities, 3 in Tirana including University of Tirana, Polytechnic University of Tirana, Agricultural University of Tirana, and 5 located at regional level such as University of Shkodra, University of Elbasan, University of Korca, University of Vlora and University of Gjirokastra. There were also included in the system the Higher Institute of Arts, the Higher Institute of Physical Training and the High Nursery School as well, counting a number of 11 higher education institutions. Except for High Nursery School which was considered a non-university Higher Education School, both institutes were considered as universities. There was a notable absence of post-secondary vocational sub-degree provision. It should be noted here that in 1990-s the higher education system in Albania was composed by only one university and seven higher pedagogical and agricultural institutes in total (Tsakonas, F. 2002).

The 1999 Law already allowed and regulated the establishment of private higher education institutions. The demand to open private universities in Albania was rather high during that period. From 2002 until 2005, there were 5 private higher education institutions licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science. (The Final Report on Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform, 2014) The presence of private higher education institutions started to become progressively evident in the higher education system by the end of 2006, counting a number of 15 private institutions.

At the beginning of 2014 there were 59 Institutions of Higher Education, 15 public and 44 private ones accompanied by massive expansions of study programmes in every existing higher education institution. During the analyzed period, from 1995 (with 11 public HEIs) till 2014 the number of higher education institutions (public and private) has quintupled. The increased number of higher education institutions associated with low

quality of the providers pushed the government during 2014 towards closing a considerable number of higher education institutions, mostly private¹².

Meanwhile since 2002, there has already been a massive expansion in enrolments as well. Whereas in the past only about half the secondary graduates were entering tertiary education, during the recent years nearly every student leaving secondary school with the Matura is entitled to a place in Higher Education. It is estimated that approximately 95 per cent make use of this option at present, most of them with a very low performance. This rapid expansion resulted in a negative effect on the quality of entering students.

Table1. The number of students according to status of universities and the form of studying.¹³

Higher education Institutions	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Public and private HEI	63257	74747	86863	90606	93139	122326	134877	160839
Public HEI	62274	73031	81102	81100	79795	98917	107523	126257
Full time studies	42202	50567	58916	62289	61343	79615	88439	99241
Part time studies	19616	21898	21820	18119	17772	18218	18441	26655
Distance learning education	456	566	366	692	680	1084	643	361
Private HEI	983	1716	5761	9506	13344	23409	27354	34582
Full time studies	983	1716	5761	9506	13344	22894	26784	34219
Part time studies	0	0	0	0	0	515	570	363

¹² http://www.aal.edu.al/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=384&Itemid=256&lang=sq

¹³ The data of the Higher Education Institutions are gathered from the World Bank and UNESCO. These data are published in the Final Report for reforming higher education and scientific research (2014) from the Commission for Higher Education and Scientific Research

(in %)								
Higher education Institutions	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Public and private HEI	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Public HEI	98.4	97.7	93.4	89.5	85.7	80.9	79.7	78.5
Full time studies	67.8	69.2	72.6	76.8	76.9	80.5	82.3	78.6
Part time studies	31.5	30.0	26.9	22.3	22.3	18.4	17.2	21.1
Distance learning education	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.9	0.9	1.1	0.6	0.3
Private HEI	1.6	2.3	6.6	10.5	14.3	19.1	20.3	21.5
Full time studies	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	97.8	97.9	99.0
Part time studies	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	2.1	1.0

In the time frame of seven years from 2004-2005 until 2011-2012 the number of enrolled students has approximately tripled at the expense of quality and in the violation of government policy itself. (Hatakenaka, S. and Thompson, Q (2006) The massification of the higher education system is evident through the enormous number of public and private HEIs spread in Albania, mainly university type of HEIs, associated with the increasing number of enrolled students. Apart from the increased number of enrolled students and universities, the higher education system hasn't diversified enough to respond to the needs of all potential students, leaving behind the non-university type of HEIs, which correspond to 1 per cent of the whole study programmes in Albania. (Final Report on the Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform). According to Hatakenaka, S. and Thompson, Q (2006) the labour market conditions in Albania are so far from being settled and it would not be sensible to launch an aggressive expansion of the tertiary sector at the moment. On the other hand, it is not clear that the current tertiary education programmes

adequately reflect the changing needs of the economy, in which new types of graduates are needed to lead market-based growth.

The massification of the higher education system with the enormous number of private HEIs contributed in constraining the academic staff of public HEIs, by working part time or full time in private HEIs, damaging in this way the valuable human resource created through time of public universities.

During 2014, the Albanian government in order to pay attention to the quality in the higher education system, closed at least 14 private HEIs, suspended at least 6 others, and closed the branches of public Universities as well as one public University which did not fulfil the standards in higher education.¹⁴

Study programs offered by the universities

The tertiary education programs during the transition period did not adequately reflect the changing needs of the economy. Furthermore, they have neither changed neither the way of teaching which was based on the transfer of facts and not on the method of how to acquire and apply knowledge, nor the diversity of study programs offered (Pleskovic, B. Aslund, A. Bader, W. Campbell, R. 2002). As a post-communist country, the higher education system in Albania especially during the period from 1992 to 1999, was overly specialized and extremely rigid.

The universities organized and performed scientific, educational and training work but they were focused mainly on first degree level consisting of 4-5 years of study, culminating in a degree of a specialist branch of study. Until 1999 the establishment, organization and functionality of postgraduate schools and doctorate studies were approved by the Committee of Scientific Qualification, an institutional organization near the Council of Ministers involved in the direction of postgraduate research qualifications. During this period, there was a lack of bylaws that defined the establishment of postgraduate schools at universities for further studies, as well as a notable absence of vocational sub degree provisions after secondary school. The undergraduate programs

¹⁴ <http://www.aaal.edu.al/index.php?lang=sq>

issued titles which, rather than described the qualification, suggested that the holder was qualified for a specific job (e.g. the diploma was for lawyer not a diploma in law) by narrowing the knowledge and competences gained by students.

The study programs offered by the eight universities in Albania did not change much between universities; they were characterized by the lack of multidisciplinary studies as well as the absence of market orientation in the curricula. From 62 study programs organized as first degree level in universities by 1994¹⁵, the increased number of 71 from 2000 to 2002¹⁶, did not change much the diversity of the universities.

The post graduate studies first opened in 2000¹⁷ and, were organized in postgraduate schools near universities, offering further theoretical studies, which tended to be arranged in narrow specialisms. In this period, there was the nascent of master programs organized in collaboration with foreign universities mentioning Business Administration and Public Administration Master Programs in Collaboration with American and German universities. While the PHD program was extremely limited and only developed in three main universities in Tirana. Based even in the OECD *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) education systems of Albania in that period represented a poor fit with modern economies. (Barryman, S. 2000).

The ice was broken in 2003 with the amendments made to the 1999 Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Albania by introducing a three cycle study system in higher education, as well as other Bologna related reforms. The Bachelor/Master structure (Ba/Ma structure) applies to all ISCED 5A programs and a number of ISCED 5B programs. The students were allowed to transfer from ISCED 5B to ISCED 5A programs and parts of their ECTS credits can be accepted in 5A programs. (Vucasovic. M, et al, 2009). These changes were the first steps made toward the realization of the objectives

¹⁵ Decision of Council of Ministers No. 332, dated 13.05.1996 "On admissions on higher education institutions for academic year 1996-1997" amended with decision of Council of Ministers No. 414, dated 10.6.1996 Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

¹⁶ Source: INSTAT (National Institute of Statistics) www.instat.gov.al

¹⁷ Decision of Council of Ministers No. 588, dated 2.11.2000 "On the establishment of graduate schools at the University of Tirana, Polytechnic University, Agricultural University and the Academy of Physical Education and Sports" Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

of Bologna declarations followed by a holistic approach including legislative, political and administrative reforms done in Albania.

But in many cases the newly established First Cycle study programs were apparently the result of compressing the content of a four-year Diploma program into a three-year study program. This led to an overloaded study program and caused the dilemma of what to include and teach in the Second Cycle program. In the meantime, this situation was being slowly rectified in a cumbersome revision process.

As in the case of Croatia, where according to Rodin (2009) as cited in Zgaga, P. 2011 'programs were mechanically split in two parts in order to satisfy the formal requirement of 3+2 or 4+1', the same situation happened even in Albania. Further on, 'master programs did not develop in direction of diversity and multi-disciplinarily but, as a rule, remained mono-disciplinary and substantively related to the first Bologna cycle'.

Regarding the teaching methodologies and the content of the curricula, according to the National Strategy for Higher Education (SKALA 2008) the majority of university programs do not meet the needs of the society and of the economy. With regards to the methodologies and the style of teaching, the general tendency is to provide students with ready-made information which requires only repetition of the information without encouraging critical thinking. With regards to the content of the subjects, they are often narrow and traditional. They need to provide students with alternative choices and flexibility of studies. These shortcomings constitute one of the main reasons why a significant number of students choose to study abroad, and only few of them return.

The approach to Higher Education that Albania has inherited, is orientated at teacher-input. It emphasizes theory (which has a high status for the academic) at the expense of the application of theory (which still has a low status). The student is expected to remember a large body of knowledge that is presented didactically, typically with little regard for time for independent learning, learning outcomes and the students' actual capacities on graduation.

It is a challenge for Albanian university teachers to adapt to the student-orientated approach implicit in the Bologna Process, particularly in those fields having very high

SSRs (Student Staff Ratio). Another key concern for the student's educational experience is the required well-developed sense of corporate responsibility which is limited in Albania. (DAAD 2010)

Meanwhile according to Hatakenaka, S. and Thompson, Q. (2006) the expansion of the higher education system needed to be strongly accompanied with deep curricular reforms to modernize the content of teaching in order to meet the likely future market needs, which as it was foreseen was faster than the growth of suitably qualified students.

According to the National Strategy for Higher Education (SKALA 2008), in order to provide quality teaching and rich information, the academic staff must engage in in-depth academic and pedagogical research which will allow students to be informed about the most recent research developments in the respective fields.

Governance, management and finance

The demands put on higher education in both their teaching and research missions are growing rapidly. The lifelong learning agenda, widening participation rates, an increasingly costly research infrastructure due to advances in the field of technology and tougher quality requirements raise the question of how to fund the higher education institutions if they are to meet these challenges.

Multiple funding set within a framework of public responsibility is seen as an opportunity to guarantee further sustainable development of institutions and their autonomy and as a way of addressing the challenges that Bologna Process faces beyond 2010.

Generally speaking, the funding of higher education in many countries takes place by means of allocating grants to higher education providers. In the past the main criteria to determine the amount of funding allocated to each institution by the State have been based on input. There has been a change over the last years from input funding to output criteria, through the introduction of output criteria in the calculation of funding and through the use of instruments such as performance-based funding and contract funding. (Jongbloed, B. 2010).

The 2008 OECD study on tertiary education states: ‘one of the more pronounced trends in tertiary education around the world over the past decade or more: the shift to allocation mechanisms that are more performance-based. This shift can take several forms including setting aside a portion of funds to be paid on a performance basis; establishing performance contracts between government and institutions; creating competitive funds to stimulate greater innovation, higher quality, and improved management of institutions; and implementing processes in which institutions are paid on the basis of results, not inputs.’ (Santiago et al., 2008, p. 197, as cited in Jongbloed, B. 2010)

Future debates about the funding of higher education will continue to engage both the allocation of costs and the legitimacy of those costs on one hand and the efficiency of higher education funding on the other.

There will continue to be pressures to find new revenues since in most countries tax revenues are already stretched. Certainly changes in tax policy encouraging private philanthropy would be a step forward.

The key issue is to encourage further discussion and sharing of good practice in relation to accessing diverse sources of funding, recognizing that in practice very few countries are going to be able to provide sufficient public funds to fund all the higher education provision they would like.

A diversification of funding mechanisms does not mean, though, that higher education ceases to be a public responsibility. The responsibility of public authorities is not limited to providing direct funding. It includes laying down the rules under which alternative funding may be sought and provided thus acknowledging that European higher education needs sustainable funding. Furthermore, core educational goods and services require further financing.

As indicated by Eurydice (2008), the discussion on the funding of higher education in Europe primarily focuses on the following broad items (p. 7): 1) increasing the public funding for higher education; 2) granting more autonomy to institutions for managing financial resources; 3) establishing direct links between results and the amount of public

funding allocated; 4) encouraging the diversification of funding sources as well as the creation of partnerships with research institutes, businesses, and regional authorities.

Referring to the sources of the financing, the higher education system in Albania during this period was financed only by the Government with public funds. The state administration's activities were executed by the Ministry of Education. The competences of the Ministry of Education and Science included the management and professional supervision of the higher education institutions. Along with the Ministry of Education, the Government executed the task of State Administration. They elaborated the higher education financing standards and handled development requirements in the field of education. For all universities the decisions on the number of students enrolled in the first year of studies as well as on the standards implemented concerning the financing of the universities' activities were taken by the Government.

The control and the influence of the Government and the Ministry of Education in the higher education institutions was obvious. Even though the Law recognized the right of universities to create income from secondary activities, the control of the government on the universities was very strong to let the universities create ways for self-revenues, particularly until 2007. This issue needed further decentralization regarding the administration of budget funds and management of university.

Regarding the financing of the universities, apart from the state budget, one of the main sources of universities' incomes were the fees paid by the students. The fees were divided in three main types:

- The fees paid by students who were registered in main quotas.
- The fees paid by students who were registered in secondary quotas.
- Starting by 2003 the fees paid by students who were following part time study programs.

Another source of income for universities was the income from the services they provided. Because the academics did not have any incentives for channelling their work through the university, they preferred to work privately rather than through the university. So, this source turned to be unexploited.

The truth was that the government had administrated every income of the universities centrally. The government provided ways for further incomes of the universities, which were too centralized. The universities had little flexibility to move resources between faculties and from faculties to the centre. All income earned by any public university were treated as it was part of the consolidated government budget. If any university exceeded its estimated earnings, all additional revenue was returned back to Ministry of Finance.

The proper exercise of a university's autonomy is particularly important for the enhancement of its quality, and as another principle of the Bologna Process states "The quality of academic programs needs to be developed and improved for students, and other beneficiaries of Higher Education, across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)". A university that is free to make its own choices in the design of its study programs can do so in a way that best matches its strengths, including those of its staff and their research activities, as well as matching the needs of the potential employers to its graduates.

If a university has the freedom to manage its income in the most cost-effective way it has the means of securing the best possible, match between its study programs and the facilities and other support that can be provided for its students. Moreover, a university that has the freedom to make its own choices is best placed to compete with others, whether these are public or private institutions, and whether it is competing regionally, nationally or internationally.

One of the main purposes of the reforms introduced by the 1999 Higher Education Reform Law was to bring greater autonomy to the governance of universities. But the law was weak regarding the matters of governance and management. There was a wrong perception of the autonomy among the academics, thinking that greater autonomy can be operated without any management change. The concept of management was relatively new for universities in that period. There is no reference to management processes in the 1999 law and not much attention has been paid to developing them. The law didn't sufficiently support the notion that any increase in university autonomy was closely linked with increased accountability to the main stakeholders and having clearer responsibilities for decisions which the management processes require.

In the 1999 Law, universities for the first time were considered as public legal entities, which in no doubt should have been accompanied by greater autonomy inside universities. But in fact the Law did not pay much attention to the management process of the universities, by giving this responsibility to the Senate. The competences given by Law to the Senate for dealing with the main administrative and financial issues of the university did not correspond to the role played by the administrative bodies that were recognized by the general budget law in Albania as responsible bodies for institutional management.

In Albania, the autonomy of higher education institutions had been in the focus of a long debate due to the operation of the centralized state management system (Malaj et al, 2005). The discussion about autonomy has been closely linked to the financial management in the higher education system and the role played by the different actors in development of financial policies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the introduction of Bologna reforms has also triggered the debate and changes in the higher education funding policy and the division of power in the financial management between higher education institutions and the state across the region. (Vucasovic et al, 2009)

However, based on the 2007 Law, universities did have an essential autonomy with regards to academic matters, and a partial autonomy concerning institutional arrangements and financial issues. The government used to have a strong position in the system, especially with regard to the regulation of financial and administration procedures, studies structure and its organizational framework, knowledge worker workload, student enrolment size, tuition fees, the establishment of new study programs, and so forth. Nevertheless, the government agencies did not have enough expertise and capacities to properly monitor the higher education institutions behavior. (Nelaj, D. 2009)

Based on the 2007 law the public institutions of higher education were funded by: a) transfers from the state budget; b) incomes generated by public institutions of higher education (tuition fees, different services provided etc.); c) other sources destination.¹⁸

¹⁸ Law no. 9741, dated 21.05.2007 "On the Higher Education in the Republic of Albania", clause 73, (as amended), Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

Strategic planning and management is the process of deciding what the university is for, assessing where it is now, where it needs to go, and how to get there. This means seeing the university as a whole, and taking action to build on strengths, remedy weaknesses, exploit opportunities and circumvent threats. Greater autonomy and accountability means the university and its management processes must become more integrated, with new tasks for management in establishing and sustaining an integrated university program of activities. This calls for a new approach to strategic planning and management.

Greater autonomy for a University carries with it the need for clear accountability, both for internal management and externally. There are two further requirements for accountability before any university should be given full autonomy, one is a more complete approach to internal accountability, and the other is for external accountability to the community as well as the nation.

Within the 2007 Law, some internal accountability has been provided by the arrangements for internal management. But a fully autonomous university needs to have stronger internal accountability for its management according to the World Bank Report (2012). In particular, appointments to senior management posts should be on the basis of an objective assessment of an individual's competence and ability to do the job - and not simply on his/her popularity as reflected in an election. The senior management posts concerned are those of the Rector, Deputy Rectors and Deans.

HEIs never enjoyed sufficient autonomy in the handling of funds. Financial procedures have been such that they did not encourage HEIs to generate more income, despite the positive attempts which have been made in this sense. Only a small part of the public funds allocated to HEIs were calculated on an objective basis, except from salary funds. Moreover, the methods utilized to determine these funds did not take into consideration the results and the levels of different HEIs. After the entry into force of the HE Law (2007), according to the National Strategy for Higher Education (SKALA 2008) HEIs were granted more leeway in terms of flexibly and effectively managing financial resources. Increased freedom in managing funds constitutes an important aspect for the development of institutional autonomy; however this should go hand in hand with strengthening management capacities and the increase of transparency and accountability

with regards to the utilization of funds. This law also provides for the development of a new methodology of funds' allocation.

To establish and encourage the partnerships of public universities with different institutes, businesses, and regional authorities a new methodology and guides were developed during 2010-2012 for funding them through grants, so-called a Strategic Development Fund, where the HEIs developed and presented projects leading mainly to the improvement of teaching and learning methods, introducing 2 year diplomas; supporting the management development; transforming the regional universities into Regional Development Centers, etc. (Mico, H and Papadhopulli, S. (2014). Due to the constraints of the state budget and as a result of the economic crisis, no funds were made available to HEIs in that period from the government to support these projects.

Despite the changes and improvement the financing of HEIs has gone through, there are three main issues that this system has actually suffered, as even the HE governmental reform group concluded in July 2014 as follows:

- i. The low level of funding of higher education in Albania compared to all European countries, including our closest neighbours.
- ii. Limited access to HEIs to create alternative income to support growth standards and quality of teaching and research.
- iii. The lack of a financial mechanism that creates internal incentives to increase the quality and increase the efficiency of financial management¹⁹.

The overall funding level for each HEI from the State Budget is expected to be based on the national development policies and must reflect their performance. The funding manner must encourage the efficiency, so the total HEIs' funds may be divided into one or two blocks in order to cover all the major activities and then be asked to plan the budgets within the total. This block-based funding will contribute to the enhancement of the autonomy, for as much as HEIs will prepare their own plans and budgets within this

¹⁹ Final Report on the Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform – July 2014. Available at: http://www.arsimi.gov.al/files/userfiles/reformaalksh/Raport_Final_Ministria_Arsimit.pdf

ceiling. On the other side, this funding manner will induce motivation for efficiency in the integration process of the Research Institutes at the HEIs.

Evaluation and accreditation

Maintaining the quality of European higher education at a high level and raising it even further has been one of the major goals of the Bologna Process. The fundamental responsibility for quality rests within the higher education institutions. Internal quality assurance is a duty of the institution. The development of an effective “quality culture” is clearly linked with their degree of operational autonomy. External quality assurance fulfils different needs: at its best, it combines both accountability for the assurance of the public by providing information about quality and standards as well as an objective and developmental commentary for institutions.²⁰

Most European countries introduced forms of quality assurance in the 1980s-1990s, in response to national concerns (Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education, 1998; Schwarz, S. and Westerheijden, D.F. 2004). In Central and Eastern Europe, accreditation had been introduced to support the major transformations of higher education to the needs of a post-communist society (massification, curriculum change, rise of private higher education, etc.).

Academic accreditation and quality assurance were two new concepts in the law of 1994. A Quality Assurance System was conceived in the law since 1999, with the creation in 2001 of the Accreditation Agency, which was developed especially after 2003, with the establishment of the Council of Accreditation.

This agency accredits programs and institutions through a program that combines internal self-evaluation with an external check by a group of peers. The accreditation process was not compulsory for all universities until 2007 when the new law came into force. The establishment of this agency was not accompanied with the necessary legal supporting basis to define standards, criteria, procedures for evaluation and accreditation, the

²⁰ Bologna beyond 2010 (2009) Report on the development of the European Higher Education Area Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministeria Conference 28-29 April 2009, Retrieve from www.ehea.info/Uploads/LEUVEN/Beyond_2010_report_FINAL.pdf

institutional arrangements regarding its relationship with higher education institutions, and above all with its international homologues institutions.

Only in the Law of 2007 did its functions become consolidated. This agency continues to play its role for developing the quality assurance standards & procedures, monitoring the quality assurance internal systems of each HEI and their accreditation. The process of external quality evaluation is currently compulsory for each HEI (public or private) in Albania. For the accomplishment of more objective and professional evaluations, particularly on curricula and teaching methods the systematic engagement of foreign experts is undertaken.

In the framework of assessing the curricula, the HE National Strategy pointed out that a special attention will be paid to teaching style and methods. PAHEA will assess the HEIs' progress in developing new methods, which focus on the student and render the learning process more interactive. PAHEA will also review the means by which any HEIs judge the scale of the implementation of new teaching methods by its own academic staff.

Design of procedures and criteria for evaluation and configuration of this system was relatively slow in comparison with the rapid growth and expansion of institutions and study programs. Evaluation and accreditation processes began to have visibility when a good part of the institutions and programs in the private system were licensed. By 2009, the system had expanded. According to the Report of the Commission for Higher Education and Scientific Research until 2009-2010 the higher education system was expanded with a large number of HEIs (11), while in 2010-2013 the system dealt with the procession of the extension of existing private HEIs and the accreditation with and without fulfillment of standard criteria. This led to a situation today where the quality suffered in favor of expanding access on the one hand and the abuse under the frame of implementing this principle on the other.

Scientific research

During the transition period, the network of research in Albania has changed very little regarding the institutional point of view and for this reason the research system was not able to reflect the major changes that had occurred in Albanian economy and society, especially the connection between higher education and research.

As a typically post-communist country, the research was funded solely by the state. The Academy of Sciences, various branch ministries together with the research centers had the monopoly on research activities, leaving the university to deal only with teaching process. (Pleskovic, B. Aslund, A. Bader, W. Campbell, R. 2002)

During this period the law “On science and technological development” was approved²¹. The law determined the Council of Scientific Policy and Technological Development as the main policymaker structure near the Council of Ministers for direction of scientific policy and technological development, but regardless of the short time of its functioning, this body didn’t realize its mission. Even though the law included the universities in the network of research institutions, this wasn’t supported by the connection of teaching process with research in universities. In the teaching norms of work determined for the higher education institutions by the Ministry of Education, the work done for research wasn’t involved in the work developed in the higher education institutions. (Hatakenaka, S. and Thompson, Q.2006)

In 2006 Albanian government undertook a reform of scientific research system. The main results of this reform can be summarized as follows: a) The Academy of Sciences was reorganized according to the model of many other European countries. It operates through a selected community of scientists organized into sections and no longer administrates research institutes. b) The research institutes of the Academy of Sciences, research institutes and ministries were detached from it and integrated into the system of higher education. This structural reform was completed in 2008. Integration of the research institutes of the Academy of Science and link ministries to universities, brings Albanian research system in a line with most European countries, where higher education is integrated with scientific research, which is a basic principle of modern scientific systems. Implementation of the reorganization process of scientific research system established a modern institutional framework, as a premise for a fast development of scientific research and transfer of technology and knowledge. So as result, the higher education institutions and new research and transfer technology and knowledge centers started to develop

²¹ Law No. 7893, dated 22.12.1994 “On science and technological development” Retrieved from www.qpz.gov.al

strategies for the development of research and innovation in the context of long-term development plan of the institution.

In terms of research, each of the three Tirana universities should develop their own research strategy - consistent with the National Strategy of Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation (2010)²². The strategy of each of them should embrace the activities of the Research Institutes (RIs) with which they were merged by the 2007 Law. In this context, an important policy was set out in the National Strategy for Higher Education 2008-2013 requiring the public universities to become more diversified. The three main universities in Tirana were intended to develop into research based universities (Tirana University, Polytechnic of Tirana, and Agricultural University of Tirana), while the others with a focus on a more 'regional' role. (Mico, H and Papadhopulli, S. (2014). The vision and strategic objectives of the individual strategic plan of the public universities are expected to reflect this national policy. The National Strategy for Higher Education states that regional universities should primarily provide professionally oriented education to support regional development and should also develop 'Regional Development Centers' which undertake applied research and development aimed at helping their local economy, local businesses and other local communities. To this end, some regional universities have been working to develop mechanisms to contract applied research, with 'professional' contracts and consulting opportunities for academic staff in their fields of expertise.

Although the integration of scientific research with higher education was expected to positively affect the quality of higher education at all cycles, mainly in the second and third cycles of university studies, as in many other countries, in fact, it brought no significant incentive or innovation in research activities and was not accompanied by any qualitative evolution of research-development at the national level.

According to the Final Report on the Higher Education and Scientific Research Reform, the research is still taken less into consideration in the process of institutional

²² Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Albania, National Strategy of Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation (2010), Available at: <http://www.euraxess.al/documents/NationalStrategyofSTI.pdf>

accreditation of higher education. In contrast to the developed countries of Europe and the region, where the preference for conducting studies or academic career development in a higher education institution is determined, among others, even from the quality of the research produced by academic staff, in Albania this selection criteria does not exist. Above all, the scientific level at institution or department level is generally measureless and its assessment is carried out only for the purpose of the individual academic career. Meanwhile there is a lack of research infrastructure and, secondly, there are no mechanisms to support the individual research activity of the professors.

The importance of Research in Higher Education is particularly underlined in the preamble of World Declaration of Higher Education (1998): “Without adequate higher education and research institutions providing a critical mass of skilled and educated people, no country can ensure genuine endogenous and sustainable development and, in particular, developing countries and least developed countries cannot reduce the gap separating them from the industrially developed ones.”²³

Discussion/concluding remarks

As presented in the previous sections the Bologna Declaration was a must for the Albanian higher education development as a mean to break down the hardening of the higher education system, changing in this way its destination. But its implementation did not take into consideration the values of the existing higher education system, and the labour market needs. The diversification of European higher education components was transformed into massification of Albanian higher education system. The system needs to be diverse enough to respond to the needs of all potential students and requirements of the labour market at the same time. But actually, the university higher education significantly still prevails over that of vocational, non-university education and this is evident since this education covers a very small number of study programs offered (0,1 per cent) as well as small number of students (1 per cent) in the system

Although the diversification of the Bologna process became part of the higher education system, universities have tried to “copy” each other in the organization, study

²³ World Declaration of Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action (1998) Available at: http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/wche/declaration_eng.htm

programmes and management system without creating their own profile, in particular the regional universities. The identification on each higher education institution through their particularities is very important in creating their profile, by incorporating the needs of the trade market and the features of the region where the HEIs are located.

The massification of the number of students was not supported with an increased number of academic staff, with further investments and improvement in infrastructure. Consequently, all these diminished the quality of the higher education process, and the teaching and learning process as well.

During the implementation of the Bologna process many steps were taken to increase universities' autonomy by increasing accountability and by having clearer responsibilities for decisions which the management processes require. The existing weaknesses in governance and management of universities need to be corrected in order to move forward with increased autonomy. The concept of management is relatively new for Albanian universities.

Despite the changes and improvement that the financing of HEIs has gone through, there are still some main issues that this system has actually suffered and that are closely linked first with the low level of funding of higher education compared to all European countries. Meanwhile financial mechanisms needs to be established to create internal incentive to increase the quality and the efficiency of financial management

The evaluation culture started to develop later mainly by following the best practices from EU countries. The quality of teaching process should be the focus of the HE reform. Establishment of the quality assurance mechanism including internal and external evaluation is very important to improve it.

Last but not least, the implementation of the reorganization process of the scientific research system established a modern institutional framework, as a premise for a fast development of scientific research and transfer of technology and knowledge. But the research is still taken less into consideration in the process of institutional accreditation of higher education. The preference for conducting studies or academic career development in a higher education institution is determined, among other aspects, from

the quality of the research produced by academic staff, but in Albania this selection criteria does not exist.

In general, following the implementation of the Bologna process, higher education policy corresponds to the Bologna agenda. However it's very important that the particularities of a transition country are taken into consideration to a considerable extent from the policy transfer for the construction and Europeanisation of the higher education system.

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