

Higher education in Macedonia: some emerging managerial issues

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Abstract

Higher education reform in central and eastern Europe has been gathering pace throughout the 1990s with increasing collaboration between institutional managers in those countries and those in western Europe. This article explores the theme of reform and change in higher education in Macedonia. After briefly outlining the history of higher education in Macedonia, the article highlights some of the legislative, organisational, funding and planning issues facing institutional managers and draws some comparisons with experience elsewhere which might influence the reform process.

Introduction

The 1990s have seen a rapid expansion of collaboration between western nations and those of central and eastern Europe. This collaboration has been encouraged by the TEMPUS programmes of the European Union: PHARE for the countries of central and eastern Europe and TACIS for the New Independent States and Mongolia. In 1996 the PHARE programme was extended by the inclusion of two new countries, one of which was the Republic of Macedonia which forms the focus of this article (the other being Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The theme of reform and change in higher education in central and eastern Europe is becoming well documented, but so far little attention has been given to issues of higher education management in Macedonia, a small country of somewhat less than two million inhabitants situated in the central part of the Balkan peninsula, bordered by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the north, Bulgaria on the east, Greece on the south and Albania on the west. In 1995, however, workshops were organised by CEPES and the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation) in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, which brought together colleagues from the UK and senior members of staff from the two universities in Macedonia. The workshops entitled Higher Education Policy and Change in Macedonia were followed by further collaboration directed towards management enhancement and improvement of quality by means of self-evaluation at the faculty and departmental levels.

Building on that collaboration, this article aims to raise the profile of higher education in Macedonia. It will commence by briefly outlining the history of the higher education system; will proceed by highlighting some of the legislative, organisational, funding and planning issues currently facing higher education managers in Macedonia; and in conclusion will draw some comparisons with experience elsewhere which might influence the reform process.

Higher Education in Macedonia

The history of higher education in Macedonia is one of faculty development. It began, some seventy years ago, in several departments which were an extension of the University of Belgrade, the language of instruction being Serbian.

After the Second World War and the establishment of a Macedonian state (within the Yugoslav federation) university-level studies were restarted in 1946, again in a small number of departments (mostly those to train high-school teachers) forming the Faculty of Philosophy. The Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry followed. As the number of faculties grew it became necessary to create the university as an organising body. The University of St Cyril and St Methodius, named after the first Slavic enlighteners, was therefore founded in 1949. By 1996, the University had grown to about 21,000

undergraduate students and 1,100 permanent teaching staff in 24 faculties and nine independent scientific institutes. A variable number of foreign students from a range of countries regularly attend the University. The University's institutions are located mainly at Skopje, but the Faculty of Mining and Geology and a pedagogical faculty are at Stip. The National and University Library, St Clement of Ohrid, keeps close ties with the University, but is not an integral part of it.

The University of St Clement of Ohrid, a newer and smaller institution, was founded in 1979. It consists of four faculties (two in Bitola and one each in Prilep and Ohrid), two colleges (in Bitola) and three scientific institutes (two in Prilep and one in Ohrid). A university library also forms part of the University. The University was named after the most famous disciple of St Cyril and St Methodius, who founded the Ohrid literary school which has claims to be the first university in the whole of Europe. Unlike ancient foundations of Western Europe, however, the literary school ceased to exist after St Clement's death in 916.

Higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate level is given through the medium of Macedonian. A notable exception is the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje which benefits from a recent special law providing opportunities for study in the language of the national minorities if there are at least 20 such students enrolled in the first year of a course. Three years ago, the political parties of the Albanian ethnic minority were instrumental in establishing, contrary to the existing laws, a self-proclaimed university in Tetovo where the teaching language is Albanian. This so-called university has not been recognized by the government as a legal educational institution and some suspect that the reason behind its establishment is not educational but political, this being seen as only a step towards federalisation (and perhaps even eventual partition) of the country.

Legislative Issues

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, universities are granted autonomy although the meaning and content of autonomy is left to be answered by the appropriate law. At the present time a new Law of Higher Education is being drafted. This is different from the situation with primary and secondary education for which new laws are now operative. It is suspected that the main reason for the delay in securing Parliamentary approval for a new Law of Higher Education is the question of the language(s) in which higher education is to be given, although the officially cited reason is that the draft is undergoing international scrutiny to ensure compatibility with legislation of the European Union. As a consequence, the former Law of Directed Education still applies to the universities although not to the institutions of secondary education. ("Directed education" is a literal translation of a phrase which has been coined in former times and refers to secondary and college-level education taken together, both of which were geared towards providing students with skills required for future employment; an exact English counterpart does not seem to exist.)

Thus, from the legislative point of view, there is a rather awkward dichotomy between the two branches of the former "directed education". Under the provisions of this still valid law, the only language of instruction in institutions of higher education is Macedonian (with the exception of some specialised fields), but the rights of minority groups are protected by the Constitution. It is the creative and somewhat flexible interpretation of constitutional provision which has established opportunities for instruction in the languages of the national minorities in the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje (see above).

In anticipation of the future Law of Higher Education, some institutions of higher education have passed internal acts (statutes), abolishing some forms of organisation and decision making procedures typical under the previous system. For instance, St Cyril and Methodius University has created a Senate as its highest governing body in place of the previous Council whose membership represented the equivalent of the workers councils in other organisations and enterprises. Senate is composed of two representatives from each faculty and one from each independent scientific institute. The Senate members must be at least associate professors or their scientific equivalent.

Not surprisingly, there has been some debate and misunderstanding between the government and the authorities of the two universities on the meaning of institutional autonomy and the form in which it will

find constitutional expression. The question has not been finally settled as yet, but the above experience highlights two issues: the nature of autonomy within a university context and the difficulties faced by university managers during a period of legislative change.

Organisational Issues

The history of the establishment and development of higher education in Macedonia has led to the current situation in which universities are loose associations of faculties and other institutes, with variations regarding internal organisational and decision-making processes.

Notwithstanding these differences, each university is headed by a rector, elected for a limited term. The rector is aided by two or three pro-rectors. Faculties are headed by deans (the local term is "dekan") aided by vice-deans ('prodekan'). Independent scientific institutes are headed by directors. The highest governing body of St Cyril and Methodius University is the Senate (as described above), while the executive board ('uprava') consists of the rector, pro-rectors, deans of faculty and directors of the institutes. The highest governing body of St Clement University, on the other hand, is the University Council, a body with no limitation on membership and which remains something of a relic from the previous system. The rectors, pro-rectors and general secretaries of the two universities comprise the Rectors Conference of Macedonia.

The curricula, which have tended to be rather rigid and structured (Soptrajanov, 1991), must be approved by university bodies, but the final (albeit relatively formal) authority lies with the Ministry of Education (its exact title is Ministry of Education and Physical Culture) because it is the Ministry which has financial responsibilities for university studies, thus acknowledging a practical limitation on universities' autonomy and providing evidence of the inter-relationship between academic and financial decisions. The majority of faculties organise post-graduate studies leading to a master's degree. Both universities are also entitled to grant doctoral degrees.

Undergraduate studies are conducted mainly in faculties where the duration of studies is of four to six years and also in a limited number of two-year colleges. The number of colleges has recently decreased after the transformation of the three former pedagogical colleges (two within St Cyril and Methodius University and one in Bitola) into four-year faculties. Intermittently active are various interdisciplinary studies.

Student entry to the universities is based on a ranking formed from a combination of high-school grades and the results of an entrance examination consisting of two subjects of which one is close to the student's future studies. The character of the second subject is different in the two universities: in Skopje its content is common for all potential students and is intended to check the general knowledge of aspirants, whereas in Bitola the second subject is chosen from the high-school subjects which are the next-closest to the future studies.

Only those who pass the entrance examination are ranked. The relevant weighting of high-school grades to entrance examination is 40:60. For each faculty or college there is a quota set by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the universities. The State fully finances only students within the agreed quota.

There are, however, two means of entry for students who have passed the entrance examination but whose ranking falls below the quota:

- firstly by payment of a tuition fee to cover part of the costs of education (the allowed percentage of such students is set each year). This route gives potential students a chance to take their chosen studies despite the fact that their over-all standing after the entrance examination is below that of the directly accepted candidates;
- secondly on the basis of a special ranking list for candidates from national or ethnic minorities, provided that the number of regularly accepted students from the given minority is below a given percentage of the allotted quota (that percentage being equal to the fraction of that minority in the

total population of Macedonia). This route is open in order to positively discriminate in favour of candidates who are not ethnic Macedonians and who are considered underprivileged because of the lower quality of their high-school training (taken in their mother tongue) and/or their poor command of the Macedonian language in which the entrance examinations are taken. It is used mainly, but not exclusively, by ethnic Albanians, members of the largest minority in Macedonia. Such a provision has been a subject of some controversy. For instance, the political parties of the ethnic Albanians believe that this is just a gimmick to circumvent the recognition of the so-called University of Tetovo, whilst potential Macedonian students argue that positive discrimination in favour of minorities amounts to negative discrimination against them.

Funding and Planning Issues

Although the Ministry of Education funds students within the agreed quotas, the annual budget is only sufficient to run the universities on a day to day basis. The interest of the government in the advancement of higher education has led to some infra-structural support such as the establishment of a computer network at the University of St Cyril and St Methodius and of an academic and research network (MARNET) connected to similar international networks (notably INTERNET); purchase of some equipment, books and periodicals; and provision of new student accommodation. In addition to the involvement of the Ministry of Education, valuable contributions have been made by the Ministry of Science and other ministries. Some international support has also been instrumental in improving the infrastructure of the two universities. In general, however, there have been insufficient funds to make significant systematic improvements, particularly in the science-based disciplines. These funding constraints are a reflection, not only of the economic situation of Macedonia during its transitional period, but also of the difficult international situation which faced the country during its early years of independence (Šoptrajanov, 1995).

By far the largest percentage of public funding comes from the Ministry of Education, although funds are received also from the Ministry of Science (on the basis of proposed and accepted projects), from contracts with outside institutions and from tuition fees paid by some of the students. Funding by the Ministry of Education is undertaken on the basis of pre-set criteria which take into account, for instance, the nature of the discipline (more money is allotted to experimentally-based than classroom-based faculties); the number of quota students; and the number of teaching (and other) personnel and their position on the academic hierarchy. The criteria are somewhat loose, however, and this leads to some bargaining between the faculties and the Ministry. The significant factor is that the money is allocated by the Ministry of Education directly to the respective faculty and that procured from projects and contracts directly to the respective teams. The Rector's offices are also funded directly from the Ministry. The role of the university is strictly limited to some input into discussions about the funding criteria to be adopted. Until the academic year 1996/97 tuition fees, which vary according to subject, also went entirely to the respective faculty. For 1997/98, however, an agreement was reached within the governing bodies of St Cyril and Methodius University to split the amount in a 20:80 ratio between the University, for common activities and needs, and the respective faculty. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent this agreement will be implemented and whether it will be extended to government funding.

Such a funding methodology reflects and reinforces the historical concept of universities in Macedonia as rather loose associations of faculties and other institutes with a limited degree of power for the university as such and a high degree of independence for the constituent parts. Such a situation suits well the wishes of the faculties and institutes and their personnel, but hinders the promotion and implementation of common goals and policies.

Comparative Experiences

The above description of the higher education system in Macedonia has highlighted a number of issues which will be familiar to higher education managers in many parts of the world, although the approach to those issues may have a local flavour. In particular, the account has drawn attention to:

- the concept of autonomy and its meaning within a university context, particularly during a period when the role of the state in relation to higher education is being reassessed and legislation is being revised; and
- the recognition of the need to define institutional goals and priorities through a process of institutional planning and a resource allocation methodology which will bring together rather than divide the university.

Although the Macedonian constitution grants autonomy to universities, the meaning of the concept is not specified and in practice the freedom of universities is limited. Examples have been given above of funding and curricula constraints exercised by government. Such examples are typical of the balance which has to be maintained between institutional autonomy and public accountability (Mauch and Sabloff, 1995; Vroijenstein, 1995). That balance is likely to differ between academic, financial and managerial spheres of activity. It will also differ according to the history and culture of the educational system in which the issue is set. In the UK, for instance, institutions have jealously guarded their academic freedom but have been heavily dependent upon government funding. In recent years a move from an elite system to a mass system of higher education has increased demands for accountability in terms of both financial responsibility and the quality of the teaching and research provided by the institution. As a consequence, the funding body which had previously been seen as a buffer between universities and government (Bligh, 1990) providing funding to universities and advice to government had, by the mid 1980s become an agent of government policy (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Scott, 1995) with a responsibility not only for funding but also for quality assessment.

Meanwhile, in countries in central and eastern Europe and in central Asia, the balance between autonomy and accountability has taken the form of greater institutional responsibility at the expense of direct government control. In Romania, for instance, the Education Law, 1995 gives more discretion to institutional managers whilst the establishment of the Higher Education Funding Council provides an intermediary body between institutions and government. As in Macedonia, however, institutional managers have been unsure of the extent of their powers of discretion. There can be conflict between new education laws and old finance laws; differences in perception and interpretation; and inevitably a lack of experience on which to draw.

A common factor in these developments has been the need for institutional managers to focus on the more efficient and effective use of resources; to encourage income generation from non-government sources; and to instigate quality assurance procedures. A favoured response internationally has been one of decentralisation of decision-making. This may take the form of either decentralisation from government to institutions or from institutional to faculty or departmental level. As London (1996) has observed, the strategy has been proposed in both developed and less-developed nations as it is believed "to reduce abstraction in decision-making; to permit more prompt response to educational problems; and to clarify lines of accountability" (p.194). Experience suggests, however, that there can be unexpected consequences of financial devolution with a consequential need for institutions to maintain a balance between devolution to enhance flexibility and effectiveness in the use of resources and central control of financial allocations to ensure consistent strategic direction (Thomas, 1997).

It was a recognition of these tensions that led senior managers at the workshops on *Higher Education Policy and Change in Macedonia* to believe that as universities are increasingly expected to plan for their own future, so there is a need to address not only the relationship between government and university but also between the university and its constituent parts. Conscious that institutional planning is currently hampered by direct government funding of faculties, institutional managers at the workshops pressed for "new criteria for the distribution of funds" (Macedonia, 1995) with a greater degree of influence given to the university. The recent decision to allocate 20% of student fee income for distribution by the central university authorities is consistent with a recognition of this need. Of further significance is the fact that a priority area identified under the TEMPUS PHARE compact measures for 1997-98 is the development of a national strategy for financing higher education in Macedonia (Tempus, 1996).

Conclusion

This article has had the objective of raising the profile of higher education in Macedonia and of highlighting some of the issues of current concern. Those issues are international in scope whilst having a particular local flavour. The changing relationship between institutional autonomy and public accountability has given rise to the need to review planning and resource allocation mechanisms. Those mechanisms will need to encourage institutions to exercise discretion in their decision making procedures and in the management of their affairs, whilst maintaining a satisfactory level of public accountability. That will require a partnership between government and universities and also between the universities and their constituent parts. In many countries the latter issue is one often addressed through greater devolution of responsibility. In the case of Macedonia it is likely to be one involving a greater degree of institutional control to facilitate effective institutional planning. Such a shift implies a significant managerial challenge at governmental, institutional and faculty levels.

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