

THE CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMING IN UKRAINE

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Анотація

У статті розглядаються фактори, що перешкоджають реформуванню вищої освіти в Україні, незважаючи на постійні спроби її модернізації. Мова йде про основні положення нового Закону про вищу освіту та їх відповідність вимогам Болонського процесу з метою інтеграції у Європейський простір вищої освіти. Підкреслюється, що український досвід реформ у вищій школі є перехідним.

Ключові слова: реформування вищої освіти, впровадження реформ, оновлення.

Abstract

The article discusses the challenges and factors impeding the education reforms in Ukraine despite the continuous efforts to modernize the higher education system. It considers the major provisions of the new Higher Education Law of Ukraine and their alignment with the requirements of the Bologna Process for the country to integrate in the European Higher Education Area. It is emphasized that the Ukrainian experience in boosting reforms in higher education is considered to be in the transition position.

Keywords: higher education reforming, reform implementation, renewal.

Since the last decade of the 20th century higher education globally has been a highlight of many governments with the strategic goals of quality and efficiency, accessibility in a lifelong learning perspective, and openness to the society and world [8]. The European Bologna Process has turned into the platform for the countries to transform collaboration to reach these goals into multi-actor governance course of education renewal [5; p.81]. After signing the Bologna Declaration in 2005, Ukraine became part of the renewal process. However, numerous reforms and legislative attempts to modernize its higher education system did not result in deep changes turning the notion of renewal more to a buzzword than an outcome of the reforms [4], [6]. The incongruities of Ukrainian education such as Soviet stereotypes and disconnect with new realities; and the resistance to change at many levels rooted in the system structure and reluctance of individuals (Project LA MANCHE 2014) impeded all modernization efforts. September 6, 2014 might become a turning point for the higher education system in Ukraine for Higher Education Law of Ukraine was finally enacted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (Supreme Council of Ukraine, Ukrainian parliament). It is not the first law the country tries to implement to modernize the system; however, it is viewed as ‘one of the first systemic reforms that in fact draws us closer to integration with Europe’ [4].

The education system is assumed to contribute significantly to integration of Ukraine to the European Union. Despite growing understanding of the urgent need for systemic reforms in HE system based on public consensus on the major issues and continuous attempts to reform and modernize national higher education, it remains to a great extent incorrigible. The proclaimed reforms are not yet institutionalized because ‘middle- and lower-level management in universities did not fully understand the opportunities presented by joining the Bologna Process’ [6]. Economic hardships and social entities that are lingering products of the former economic and social order, and political instability also hinder this process. Furthermore, the policies are initiated from the top government with little higher education practitioners’ and public input with the focus on policy procedures rather than real outcomes of proposed reforms. Such approach leads to ‘chaotic administration of the policy process, based on a ‘fire-fighting’ approach’. With the new Higher Education Law of Ukraine (2014) providing an opportunity for systemic modernization HE in Ukraine, it is paramount to alter the approach to decision-making on the reforms and to their implementation process.

Considering historical and social factors which affected Ukrainian higher education until the early 2000s, it can be concluded that the changes did not ‘aim to develop a new system – only to destroy the old

Soviet heritage.’ After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine inherited a potent education system with rather advanced at the time infrastructure. The country started to search for the ways to transform and modernize its HE system right after it gained independence. In this search it had to meet fundamental changes in all spheres of life: transition from the authoritatively regulated to market economy and from one party political system to democratic governance. Among the indicative contradictory political, economic, cultural, and educational factors which impacted the education system were: inconsistency and absence of research based principles in policy making for education; corruption and inequality in access to higher education, rigid hierarchy and excessive regulation of academic and research process; changed value orientations in the society yet undetermined position about those values; transition to the market economy and old-fashioned management of education; political instability and frequent changes in governing structures; to name a few [1].

The Conception of the Development of Education in Ukraine for 2015-2025 highlights the models of reforms in Ukrainian higher education. Transformation and imitation have dominated in public policy in education for more than twenty years since 1991. The period from 1991 to 2002 was marked by the attempts to transform the old system to the one which would reflect the fundamental changes in the country. The benchmarks of the first decade after gaining independence were establishment of governing bodies in education for the new state (1991-1993), laws and regulations on education, curricular revision, introduction of multi-level system of higher education (1993-1995), development of a network of HE institutions (1995-1996), transfer of school financing to the local budgets, and expansion of paid education in the HE institutions (1997-2002) Massification of higher education was another characteristic of HE system changes in the nineties. Between 1992 and 2000, the higher education system in Ukraine grew and expanded. By the end of 2000, there were 979 higher education institutions, including 315 (223 State-owned and 92 private) accredited as full-cycle institutions (offering degrees higher than Bachelor’s). This double rise (from 156 to 315) in quantity did not translate in quality: it provided easy access to diplomas yet did not ensure equal access to quality education due to limited resources. It also affected employability of graduates because of supply demand mismatch on the labor market. In 2014, the Ministry of Education and Science terminated accreditation of 177 full-cycle institutions to address the quality issue. The Law on Higher Education of 2002, which was criticized by the academic community, together with numerous by-laws did not produce any significant changes in the system. Academicians and institutions in higher education remained neglected actors of the policy development and implementation processes. Policy imposition rather than public deliberation on the urgent issues and needed reforms resulted in ‘predominantly negative perception of policies by constituencies, because it creates the wide gap of mistrust between governmental officials and educators’. Moreover, the idea about the exclusive right of the government officials for decision making in education for it warrants the positive outcomes was ‘deeply entrenched in the executive branch of government’. The National Doctrine for the Development of Education (2003) and the steps after signing the Bologna Declaration proclaimed as a breakthrough in the modernization of HE system were more imitation of the reforms and did not result in deep changes and renewal in the true essence [9].

The Bologna Process serves as the main agent for changes in education systems in the European countries. It is acknowledged as ‘possibly the deepest and most far reaching higher education reform process since World WarII, the impact of which could no longer be ignored’. The main goal of the process is consolidation of scholarly and education communities and governments for the European higher education to succeed in global competition and raising the role of education in social change. The reforms are predetermined by the world and European changes: globalization problems, information society formation, migration processes, work market mobility, emerged need to learn to live together preserving own ethnic, cultural, religion, and other diversity and accepting and respecting each other [2]. With the reform of such a scale there always will be ‘unintended or side effects’ which will slow down or impede the process.

To better understand the challenges of Ukraine in implementing the changes to enter the European Higher Education Area, it is beneficial to discuss briefly the hindering factors most signatory countries share. Pepin emphasizes ‘the poor ownership’ of the Bologna framework at a local level. Rigid hierarchy and bureaucracy which in a number of signatory countries remains unaltered and impact of the highly centralized, top-down higher education structure are some of the determining aspects of the current situation in Turkey, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and countries in- transition, including Ukraine The changes often focus on structural reorganization without due attention to the quality and content and become change for the sake of change process. One of the negative outcomes of this process is lack of functional match between

university training and the needs of the economy in decision-making on higher education institution curricular, enrollment regulations, and University accreditation. Supply over demand approach results in employability challenges for the graduates). Conflicting relationships between 'top-level policy-makers and ground-floor academics' hamper the translation of policies in institutions. To overcome local resistance, policy makers in many Bologna signatory countries attach national reform agendas to the integration process efforts. Often local resistance stems from the concern about the dilemma between the global and the local, unity and uniformity in the modernization of higher education systems. Interpreting the Bologna Process as a way to find consensus, it is believed that the Ukrainian educational reforms should not be focused on radical changes leading to the loss of best gains and lowering the national standards; rather it aims at development of new characteristics. The evolution of education system should not be considered separate from other social spheres for the system should develop in harmony with the societal changes being an agent for those changes [2]. Political context is very important for the Bologna Process implementation. While Ukraine shares similar challenges and pressures with countries in transition on the path of integration to the European Higher Education Area, some factors make it unique. Despite formally joining the Bologna Process in 2005, Ukraine did not understand the need to reform its higher education system and did not implement any reforms. There was little attempt to get national consensus on the reforms. The indecisiveness and toss-up in European vs pro-Russian choice for the country's development direction which led to Revolution of Dignity during 2013-2014 and ongoing military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, on the one hand, aggravate the situation. On the other hand, we believe these dramatic developments provide new avenues of the renewal process due to the changed public approach to societal issues and challenges on the path of nation advancement. Bologna Process has brought 'a semblance of unity to study programs all over Europe, but at the same time it has resulted in strong competition between the European universities'. Ukrainian higher education system lags behind many systems with different economic development albeit it has a considerable potential for increasing its competitiveness and prerequisites for world recognition of its universities [6].

Higher Education Law of Ukraine which was enacted on September 6, 2014 reflects the challenges and targets described in major documents of the Bologna Process and Tempus (the European Union's program which supports the modernization of higher education in the partner countries of Eastern Europe and other regions). The comparative analysis of the requirements of the modernization of higher education with the provisions of the Higher Education Law showed that Ukraine had not made any advance yet in the attempt to booster the reforms. We are at Stage 2 with National Qualification framework: committee is established and currently discussions and consultations are taking place to promote the process. The quality assurance practices do not yet involve students and international practices. So far only claims about changes in regulations for recognition of foreign qualifications have been made; no practical steps have been implemented [11].

Slow progress in reforms brings the issues of public deliberation on the reforms to the fore of the current agenda. The opinions of the educators, University rectors in particular, about the law vary from very supportive and optimistic to critical and pessimistic. One point which everyone agrees on is that the law sends a very important political message to the public and higher education, albeit it is not a panacea. Among the most imperative provisions of the law the practitioners underline autonomy of the higher education institutions, nostrification procedures, anti-plagiarism norms and liability for academic dishonesty, and establishment of the National Quality Assurance Agency. The consensus is that the law complies with the guidelines of the Bologna process about European Higher Education Area. While the provisions of the law are viewed as revolutionary and promising, the educators share criticism and doubts as far as procedural and implementation mechanisms of those provisions. National Quality Assurance Agency is perceived as basically a new structure. It is assumed that the representation of different stakeholders (employers, academicians, research community, non-profits and students) will warrant the acclaimed changes and goals. However, it is not clear yet how this agency is going to influence the quality. Financial autonomy of the universities may be hindered by discrepancies between the law and the Budget Code as it was the case with the 2001 Law [3]. Some practitioners express their doubts about inability of the law to fight corruption in HE locally and call for the control over the government in developing by-laws and additional regulations specifying implementation steps on the provisions [10].

One of the factors hindering the reforms and modernization has been lack of research based approach to the proclaimed changes. Progressive and up-to-date claims and intentions do not work due to the absence of clearly defined outcomes and benchmarks, outlined procedures and mechanisms, new discursive practices

about the policies which would involve all stakeholders. In other words, more holistic approach to evaluation and implementation of the reforms is needed. As any program or policy the education reforms should be constantly evaluated not only from the standpoint of the efficacy and benefits of their outcomes but also validated according to the relevancy of the policies to the problem situation and their value to the stakeholders. Frank Fischer's policy evaluation framework of 'Practical Logic of Policy Evaluation' (1995) offers such a strategy explaining four levels of evaluation: technical-analytical discourse and contextual discourse which comprise the first-order level; and the second-order level comprised of the system and ideological discourses. Program verification of technical-analytical discourse answers the questions about cost and benefits of the objectives of the program, the unanticipated effects of the program, and the advantages of the program over the alternative means. Situational validation of the contextual discourse examines relevancy of the program objectives to the problem situation and circumstances which can affect the program and consequently force the program to alter the objectives. Societal vindication of systemic discourse considers the value of the policies or programs for the society as a whole and the consequences of unanticipated policy outcomes for the society. Social choice of ideological discourse seeks 'to establish and examine the selection of critical basis for making rationally informed choices about societal systems'. The Ukrainian policy-makers and education authorities outlined three phases of the Higher Education Law implementation: September 2014 (major provisions), September 2015 (National agency for ensuring quality higher education), and January 1, 2016 (additional financing for the law provisions). There is evidence of understanding that changes in the policy discourse are vital for the reforms to work. Chairperson of the Committee on Science and Education Liliia Hrynevych called for active involvement of public in the realization of the law 'We need support from the public to fully understand the realities of the universities. One of the venues to get a real picture of state can be a site of reform monitoring'[4].

Reforming education has been an ongoing process since Ukraine gained independence in 1991. The education faced the need to react instantly not only to significant socio-economic transformation in the Ukrainian society but also consider global integration processes and implement the Bologna Process requirements [12]. Political instability is the main threat to the development of higher education in Ukraine [6]. Furthermore, the Revolution of Dignity and dramatic and tragic development of the events in the country since 2014 make it very hard to predict how the situation in all sectors of social life, including higher education, is going to unfold. At the same time, these dramatic events led to huge transformation in people's minds about national identity, the direction country should go, and the place of Ukraine in the global community. It presents a unique opportunity for gaining momentum in HE modernization efforts and these efforts should be implemented at a "blistering pace" [6]. Renewal of HE system necessitates systemic reforms which would be the product of society consensus on the urgent changes, research-based policy implementation, and understanding of the significance of education as the major leverage of development and progress. This article presents the frame for policy discourse which is assumed to create prerequisites for successful implementation of legislative initiatives on reforming the higher education system in Ukraine. We believe that rigorous and research based evaluation of the reform steps and regular dialogue of Ukrainian educators with their colleagues in the European and international education community will assist in the renewal process. In this light, the future research directions include but not limited to a comparative study on higher education reforms in Ukraine and Turkey, and evaluation project on institutionalization of reforms in Ukraine.

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