

THE CONCEPT OF REFORMS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OF THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Marina Protić^{1,2}

¹Center for Strategic National Security Research – CESNA B Belgrade,

²College of Business Economics and Entrepreneurship – PEP Belgrade, Confida Serbia

Review article

<https://doi.org/10.58952/nit20231101061>

Summary

The process of European integration represents first class, social project for all the countries of the subregion of the Western Balkans. The concept of integration into the European Union covers all spheres of public life, where a significant role is played by the reform of the system of higher education. The author considers the implementation of the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Strategy, as well as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus program of the European Commission dedicated to the establishment of a "Europe of Knowledge" in the surveyed countries. The analysis shows that the Western Balkan countries are making great efforts to implement provisions of the Bologna process, particularly at the level of formal adoption in the form of law. However, numerous weaknesses are reported in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy and the elements of strengthening the impact of the labor market. According to all relevant indicators, the level of the Europeanisation of higher education in the Western Balkans is below the EU average, which points to the unsustainability and the necessity for the transformation of existing concepts.

Keywords: *Higher education, Europeanisation, The Bologna Declaration, The Lisbon Strategy, Western Balkans.*



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

1 INTRODUCTION

The last decade of the twentieth century, testifies that he began a period of globalization, which is characterized by global competition, breaking the standards of the world market and the international orientation of the organization. Globalization represents a set of different processes which basically have the idea of developing and connecting the world and can be considered from different angles. However, most often defined as a concept, form and phenomenon that implies multiple and drastic changes in all dimensions of life. It has the ability to create change which affect on the whole world. Human knowledge has become the main source of wealth and an important pillar of any society. The quality of higher education determines the future of every country, which led to significant changes in this area.

However, in order to education be productive and efficiently it has to follows the rapid changes of everyday life. It is quite clear that knowledge in today's world has become the most important potential, and the development of information and communication technologies contributed to the entire planet are increasingly relies on this "intangible" resource. New situation, which involves the modernization of administration and management, increasing demand for educational and scientific research activities, connectivity and networking, puts new challenges for the Western Balkan countries, which all have a common goal - accession to the European Union. The interest of the entire Western Balkan region is its own development and strengthening connection with Europe, whereby high education can play a significant role.

2 HIGH EDUCATION IN THE AMBIENCE OF "KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY"

All modern companies that want to reach high standards in today's extremely competitive global market must rely on human knowledge. Very fast IT and technological development shows that modern society is going through major changes, the biggest in human society's development so far. Today's society has become a society of knowledge and has the following characteristics (Miklavič, 2017):

- has no boundaries and knowledge flows through it at high speed
- knowledge has replaced classical dominance based on natural resources, labor and capital
- revolution in the technology
- on the global market can be competitive only those who have the best technology and highly educated human resources
- domestic businesses has increasingly become multinational, transnational and global
- high education became the basis for the development and prosperity.

The impact of globalization on education is cause by the impact of globalization on production process. As the global economy expands, there is a need for specialized education and proper work force. Especially interesting is the impact that trend globalization in economy makes on education. Research show, and practice confirms, that economic globalization and IT revolution demand radical changes in the very nature of the learning process and educational system modernization. Education represents the cradle of society and the treasure trove of knowledge, but it needs to be constantly improved and enriched with new knowledge based on development needs of modern society. Modernization of education system means, above all, modernization of aids in educational process such as introducing new educational technologies (computers,

videos, digital education etc.), as well as enrichment of educational content, internationalization of knowledge, globalization of education system, high specialization of educational profiles etc. changes that the IT development brings, possibilities of using different sources and not being limited only to books, as well as a new system of communication, bring with them a new atmosphere – teachers are not the only sources of knowledge and information any more, nor is the school the only center of learning and development. These situations make the value system change and deepen considerably, making the educators to always improve themselves, to be up to date with changes and to constantly work on their additional education, so that they could prepare their students for everything that could be asked of them in the future. Nowadays the schools are expected to give adequate basic education, develop ethical values, form the character and plant key values necessary for further life. All those values will in future give young people better chances for successful jobs and payment – economic security. However, the most important task of education is to follow changes in all the spheres and to change accordingly. Traditional designation of education, which comes from understanding education as systematic acquisition of scientific knowledge about nature, society and human opinion, must be changed with modern designation, which comes from the fact that the education is a system of institutional knowledge acquisition and the teaching of people to gain knowledge, skills and habits they need.

Unpredictable and changeable high complexity environment demands adequate knowledge about the use and the evaluation of constantly new information. In the context of change dynamics, the need for education means the education on needed skills and information on the use of new working programs. That demands the new concept of education – modern society

education. Conventional, traditional education is based on the presumption of reproductive, static and theoretical approach. However, that education system does not work in the modern society because it creates personnel that do not have the ability to adequately react to changes in the society. The modern concept of education sees the education as a process of continued study throughout the whole life. The modern society needs new skills and additional knowledge, with constant promotion of sustainability. It is clear that the education has become the basic instrument and the power of development, not only in the life and behavior of an individual, but also in the way of controlling states and communities on the global scale. No matter the basic goal, the quality of modern education should be the transit from reproductive to productive education, from static to dynamic, from unusable to operative. All of the above conditions the necessity that the educational system is developed in accordance with demands and needs of modern society based on knowledge. The more importance of the knowledge resource faces the individual with the new demands, choices and responsibilities. The concept of education means the education that will develop the abilities for understanding and the use of new knowledge, and that will provide needed readiness and literacy to every individual in the modern society.

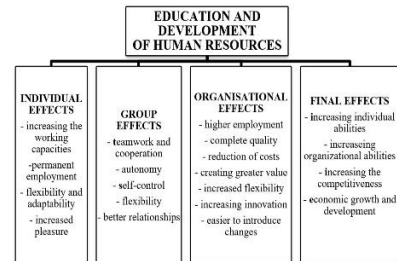
Criteria that the modern education needs to fulfill (Nešković, 2017, 589)

1. Quality, complex and comprehensive knowledge, which implies creative blend of theory and practice, as well as the blend of concretely applicable knowledge and basic education.
2. High degree of professionalism with lecturers, not only in the area of concrete subject, but also in all the areas that dominate the market.
3. Modern equipment of schools and colleges, especially with IT equipment.

4. Modern educational institution needs to encourage and develop those student talents which, based on their individual characteristics and tendencies, could be the most usable and profitable in the future practice. Should the colleges develop each student's most prominent talent, they will create leading experts in many fields.
5. Creative lecturing, as one of the priorities of modern education, has the goal of enabling the students to effectively adopt knowledge through the use of multimedia content, because only with that form of teaching the students can be actively prepared for the bond of theory and practice and are up to date with the changes that the development of new technologies brings into the everyday life.
6. Modern education demands more concrete examples, many real projects, trainings and practices, because learning from books can only expand horizons and give them necessary information, but it will not help them when they first enter real working environment.
7. Students need to be educated in the "ruthless" environment (which is the closest to the reality), because that will prepare them for what awaits them in the real world, outside the school desks.
8. New education implies the change of roles for the teachers. Instead of them leading the lecture, now they need to be the coordinators put there to follow students in their individual or group projects. Teachers responsibility is to teach students, but in modern education teachers have even bigger responsibility – to motivate them to go through the process of learning on their own, to expand and connect their knowledge, to explore and come to conclusions. All on their own.
9. Modern education needs to develop in interaction with science, technology and culture and to draw knowledge and inspiration out of them.

The number of criteria the society wants fulfilled by the modern education is constantly increased day after day, and in the future there will be demands on fulfilling even more complex tasks.

Figure 1. The effects of contemporary education



Source: The table is the result of the author's research

The importance of knowledge in human life, living and functioning is ever increasing. It contributes to widening and deepening of human knowledge and cognition, to upgrading the practical functioning in all the aspects of human interests, to faster and easier business functioning, to the management of business processes and the distribution of available resources, to the fuller realization of human rights and freedoms, to the participation in making social and state decisions and to the direction of the way to the future. It all affects the motivation in acquiring more knowledge and developing of information-communication abilities and culture of the individuals and every community, more so because the information-communication knowledge is becoming one of the main conditions for job advancement, in the field, in every aspect of human and economic activity, meaning in life and work of every individual and community.

2 EUROPEANISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 refers to the reform of higher education systems in Europe and is the basis of the Bologna process, which includes: acceptance of the system of recognizable and comparable degrees, the acceptance of the system which is based on three main cycles of studies (undergraduate, master and doctoral studies), introduction of ECTS (ECST) scoring system and the Diploma Supplement, improvement of the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, ensuring the quality of higher education, the development of comparable curricula, inter-institutional cooperation, mobility schemes and integrated programs of study, training and research. All these instruments are intended to facilitate the employment by recognizing the acquired knowledge and competencies of graduates across Europe. The final aim of the declaration is to establish a single European educational space in which lecturers, researchers and students can move easily and quickly. By accepting the Bologna process the Western Balkan countries have taken on obligations from this declaration. From a wider, euro integration aspect, this means the implementation of the necessary higher education reforms in these countries, in order to reposition their universities at European and international level and improve their own quality and competitiveness.

Lifelong Learning Programme is the cooperation program in the field of education of the European Union which supports the development of all levels of education. For now, the Western Balkans countries can participate in certain types of projects, only if their educational institutions offer expertise in an area which is the theme of the project and thus contribute to achieving the best possible

results. Since LLP is one of the main sources of funding for education development in the EU, it is important that educational institutions of these countries start their preparations for full participation in this program on time.

Tempus (Trans-European mobility scheme for university studies) is the EU program that helps reform and modernize higher education in the partner countries, and is one of the oldest and most successful EU cooperation programmes. The program helps that the education systems of partner countries accept development trends of higher education in EU derived from the Lisbon agenda and the Bologna process and fund projects involving higher education institutions from the EU and more than 20 partner countries. Tempus program started in 1990 with main goal being the modernisation of higher education sector and to enable the institutional cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe. (Protić, 2022).

Erasmus Mundus started in 1987. It represents the program of support to cooperation and mobility in higher education through promotion of the best European master and doctoral studies. The goal of the program is quality improvement of higher education and inter-cultural understanding through cooperation with partner countries (which are not members of the EU). It aims to increase the attractiveness and recognition of European higher education around the world and the European Union as one of the centers of excellence. The program works by allowing students and teaching and scientific staff from all over the world the possibility of inclusion in postgraduate studies at the higher education institutions of the EU, and vice versa, it allows for the mobility of students and teachers from EU to the partner countries. EU provides scholarships, both for citizens of partner countries who have been admitted to the Erasmus Mundus master and doctoral programs in EU

countries, as well as for its own nationals studying at partner universities. All the countries of Western Balkans participate in this program.

In the “knowledge society” competitiveness advantage is based on human knowledge and the use of potential chances and possibilities whose realisation asks for human knowledge. Nowadays key factor for competitiveness improvement is human capital which more often than not reaches up to 90% of company value. That is the acknowledgment that the knowledge, competence and skills are keys for positive competitiveness position. The country, the capital and the equipment are no longer the deciding factor in world market. Individuals, companies and even countries are becoming more and more dependent on the ways in which they develop their abilities and apply their knowledge with the goal of realising their goals.

CONCLUSION

The term of globalization dates from the far off past, and today it is defined differently. The fact is that the globalization can be viewed from different angles, however, the definition of globalization that suits this phenomenon the best, is the definition by which the globalization is the process that brings many drastic changes in all areas of life. The last few years, we see substantial acceleration of this trend due to the rapid progress in technological innovation, especially in the field of information and communication technologies. The occurrence of this phenomenon leads to serious thinking, especially with regard to the changes in the labour market, in order to better adapt the educational system of the country, which in the modern knowledge society is becoming one of the most important development factors. Socio-economic changes that accompany rapid scientific and technological development, especially the expansion of modern technologies, need highly educated people

who are able to function effectively in social processes and use the available technology. Economy competitiveness on the global scale demands high level of expertise and work force competitiveness, because the modern technological processes are based on highly educated population. Even the countries that have significant natural resources, nowadays cannot partake in further development race without educated and innovation-trained people. When it comes to the development and the application of new technologies, development tendencies of market economy oriented countries show that the education and the creation of highly skilled human resources are in the top of national strategy priorities and economic and technological development policies. Therefore the postmodern education must imply the development of highly educated personnel which can improve the national development and respond adequately to the demands of modern environment. The development of top education must be correlated to the modern development of science and technology, which means the education of human resources for specific needs and types of technical, technological, communications and innovation technologies. The new age called the digital age and the age of knowledge, demands new types of education as well. However, it is without a doubt that the institutionalised education remains the best form of education if it follows modern trends. Everything said leads to a conclusion that 21st century education needs to be guided towards the gain of specific knowledge and skills. In these new and changed circumstances, the education has a goal of increasing the human adaptability to the coming time and to increase the abilities that humans need in order to be able to fight and adjust the changes. That means that the human's future will depend on its education.

Higher education plays significant role in the European integration processes and in

the encouragement of economic and social development of Western Balkans countries. It is necessary to follow global trends and persevere through the higher education reform processes, and the reforms should be based on advanced knowledge and skills in different areas. When we talk about the Western Balkans countries it can be concluded that when it comes to the European integration processes, all of them are putting maximum effort into the implementation of all the parts of the Bologna process, and into the achievement of the goals of the Lisbon strategy and the Europe 2020 document considering the higher education. All the countries of the region have taken part in the Tempus, Erasmus Mundus and the other EU higher education programs. However, the achievement levels of these countries, as well as individual national investments into this field, are still below EU average. It is clear that the total quality of higher education in Western Balkans region is still not on satisfactory level and it needs to be put an additional effort in order to fulfil the set goals and create competitiveness of higher education and intellectual resources of these countries in the “Knowledge Economy”. The key to strengthen these transitional economies is the creation and development of higher education of European (and world) quality, compatibility of educational offer with the demand of a unified market, the creation and implementation of study programs that stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship and the development of innovation practices which would allow for postgraduates to gain new experiences and practical knowledge relevant to the quick employment.

LITERATURE

1. Arandarenko, M., Bartlett W. (2016), Conclusions: Improving Skill Policies in the Western Balkans. In: Arandarenko, M and Bartlett, W. (eds), *Labour Market and Skills in the Western Balkans*. London: LSEE.
2. Bologna declaration (1999), The European Higher Education Area, Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education, The Bologna Declaration of the June 19th 1999, http://media.ehea.info/file/Ministerial_conferences/02/8/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf, seen on 10.5.2023.
3. Jovanović, Ž., Nešković, S., Kostić, Z. (2016), Knowledge economy and intellectual property in the context of social development Serbia - Case Study, *Military Work*, 68 (3), p. 249.
4. Miklavič, K. (2017), Europeanisation in action: the (re)construction and role of higher education in post-conflict settings, *Journal of European Higher Education Area*, No 2.
5. Nešković, S., Jovanović, Ž., Čavlin, M. (2016), Economic intelligence and intellectual capital in agriculture competitiveness - case study, *Belgrade: Economics of Agriculture*, No. 2.
6. Nešković, S., (2017) The concept of Europeanization of the higher education in the Western Balkan, Novi Sad, Faculty of Economics and Engineering Management, p. 588.
7. Protić, M., (2022) European Union investment funds in the Western Balkans with international audit standards, *Dialogue and Universalism*, Vol. 32, No. 3/2022, Warszawa, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland.
8. Protić, M., (2022) Energy resources of the Balkans and great power with implications on the economic development of countries, 25 th International conference, Proceedings, The energy crisis as a key challenge for the economies, laws and media freedom

of the Western Balkan countries with special reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Travnik, Internatiobal University Travnik.

9. Sundać, D., Švast, N. (2016). Intellectual Capital - crucial factor of competitiveness of enterprises, The Ministry of Economy, Labour and Entrepreneurship, Zagreb, Croatia.