

## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION IN ALBANIA IN LIEU OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA

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This paper intends to explore the scientific research model developed at the European University of Tirana (UET), a private higher education institution in Albania. This requires for a reconsideration of the position of private universities in the higher education system in Albania, not just as profitable entities, but as institutions that provide public services for citizens in the country. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology approach, i.e. it applies document analysis and literature review in order to explore the development of the scientific research model in UET. The materials consulted include documents related to the Bologna Process; legislation of higher education in Albania; policies, guidelines and procedures of UET regarding scientific research. The paper suggests that private universities in Albania, albeit being recently established, enjoy more opportunities and freedom to develop new models for conducting scientific research. The analysis of the UET scientific research model shows that UET has adopted the most advanced Western approaches and the best practices from the Anglo-Saxon universities, bringing innovation in vision, research policies, procedures, practices and forms. The paper identifies the main principles upon which the scientific research of UET is built: (i) the connection and reflection of scientific research activities in the teaching process; (ii) the students' involvement in research activities; (iii) further qualification of academic staff including doctoral candidates; (iv) the connection between scientific research and the market. The paper argues that this model should be supported by new policies to better regulate the financing scheme of higher education in Albania, in order to provide private universities with more opportunities to further develop their scientific research. This will also lead to an increased confidence from the side of the business sector to trust private universities with their market research and other related projects.

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### Introduction

The higher education in Albania is structured according to the standards adopted and published by the countries of the European Higher Education Area, mainly reflecting the spirit and principles of the Bologna Process. The development of the private higher education sector in Albania is a new phenomenon, which was launched in 2002, but has increased in quantitative terms especially after 2005. The discussion about the private higher education in Albania is new, but this is not only an Albanian phenomenon. In the past few years, private higher education has become an important topic

in public discourse on higher education (Reisz & Stock, 2012). Even though private higher education institutions in Albania lack established experience in scientific research, they have more opportunities and freedom regarding decision-making processes compared to public higher education institutions. In this sense, private higher education institutions have the potential to develop new models in the field of scientific research.

The European University of Tirana (UET) was licensed in 2006. UET consists of three faculties and it provides undergraduate and graduate courses as well as research and doctoral studies. UET, aiming at establishing itself as a leading private university, has adopted the best Western models and best-known practices in scientific research, mainly from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In the context of the Albanian higher education system, the scientific research model as developed by UET brings innovation in vision, research policies, procedures, practices, forms as well as concrete results. As it will be argued in the following lines, this model should be supported by new policies to better regulate the financing scheme of higher education in Albania, in order to provide private universities with more opportunities to further develop their scientific research. It is true that in USA the federal government plays a limited part. America does not have a central plan for its universities ("The Brain", 2005), but the state finances a lot of money for research. A Research University I is an institution that receives at least \$40 million or more in federal support. A Research University II receives \$15.5 to \$40 million in federal support (Ezell, 2002).

Addressing the complexity of the development of scientific research in higher education in Albania, requires for a reconsideration of the position of private universities in the higher education system in Albania, not just as profitable entities, but as institutions that provide public services for citizens in the country. Conceptualizing private higher education institutions as serving the public interest shall be reflected in national higher education policy, legal framework and legal acts and therefore leading to the transformation of the existing financial scheme of higher education in Albania. The financing scheme in place does not give private universities any financial opportunities to diversify sources of funding, in order to support scientific research projects. The changes in the financing scheme of higher education will also lead to an increased confidence from the side of the business sector to trust private universities with their market research and other related projects.

The paper adopts a qualitative methodology approach, i.e. it applies document analysis and literature review in order to explore the development of the scientific research model in UET. The materials consulted include documents related to the Bologna Process; legislation of higher education in Albania; policies, guidelines and procedures of UET regarding scientific research. The paper is structured as follows: the first section discusses the scientific research as envisaged in the Bologna Process; the second session explores the scientific research development in Albania as envisaged in the national higher education policy and legal framework; the last section engages in the analysis of the case of the scientific research at the European University of Tirana.

### **Scientific research in the framework of the Bologna process**

The Bologna Process was launched in June 1999, when the European Union approved the Bologna Declaration (June 19, 1999), which defines the fundamental objectives of the Strategy of Higher Education Reform in European countries. This agreement was designed to create students and researchers access to European education system. During the Prague Conference in May 2003, special emphasis was put on the quality of higher education and research in the European Area. While in Berlin in June 2003, it was decided that the universities should be treated as legal institutions that need

autonomy. It was pointed out (Bologna process, 2003) that the emerging European Higher Education Area will benefit from synergies with the European Research Area, thus strengthening the basis of the Europe of Knowledge. The importance of research was seen as an integral part of higher education across Europe. The Ministers of Education emphasized the importance of research and research training and the promotion of interdisciplinarity in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education and in enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education more generally. They asked Higher Education Institutions to increase the role and relevance of research to technological, social and cultural evolution and to the needs of society. (Bologna Process, 2003)

The Bergen Communication (approved May 2005), specifically concentrating on scientific research, decided that in the period between 2005 and 2007 different actors would work to improve the relationship between scientific research and doctoral studies. It was emphasized the importance of research in underpinning higher education for the economic and cultural development of societies and for social cohesion. Ministers emphasized the importance of research and research training in maintaining and improving the quality of and enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA (European Higher Education Area). The core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research.

Another important step of the Bologna Process was the London Communication (May 2007). In this event, signed by 46 European countries, among other issues, particular focus was placed on the preparation of students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation. The London Communication was followed by the Leuven conference Bologna beyond 2010 in April 2009. It was decided (Bologna Beyond, 2010) that doctoral programs should respond to the changing demands of a fast-evolving labour market and high quality disciplinary research should increasingly be complemented by inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral programmes, bringing added value for the career development of early stage researchers. Sure “that is not to say that the transition to a more market-oriented system will be easy” (“The best”, 2005).

Finally, in April 2012, at the Conference of Bucharest (EHEA, 2012), Ministers of Education agreed that through the pursuit of academic learning and research, students should acquire the ability to assess situations and ground their actions in critical thought. In Bucharest, it was also highlighted that higher education must ensure a stronger link between research, teaching and learning at all levels. Study programs must reflect changing research priorities and emerging disciplines, and research should underpin teaching and learning. One of the priorities of the period 2012 – 2015 will be to encourage knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA, focusing on research and technology. As shown above, research in higher education has been one of the main priorities of the Bologna Process and the conceptualization of scientific research in higher education has been developed from one stage of the process to the other.

### **The scientific research in Albania as envisaged in the Higher Education Law**

The concept of linking academic learning activities in higher education with scientific research is not a new in Albania. Members of the academic staff in higher education institutions in Albania are aware that in addition to the teaching process they have the responsibility to develop research activities. However, scientific research and related activities in the Albanian higher education have taken on a new meaning in lieu of the transformative reforms undertaken in the past years in the framework of the Bologna Process. This is primarily stated in the Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Albania

(2011) and its related legal acts. Article No.2 on the “Mission of Higher Education” states that the mission of higher education in the Republic of Albania is: “to create, transmit, develop and protect the knowledge through teaching, scientific research and services; to develop and advance the arts, physical education and sports; to form the top specialists and prepare young scientists” (p.1). Moreover, Article No.3 of this law (on the “Fundamental Principles”) establishes as one of the fundamental principles of the higher education the academic freedom of higher education institutions, expressed in the freedom of teaching, research and creation (p.1-2).

The Higher Education Law also recognizes the right of universities and other higher education institutions in the country, to carry out applied scientific research and creative activities. Article No. 5, on the “Universities” states that depending on the primary mission, as defined in its statute, the university provides convenient report between teaching, scientific research and services provided (p. 2-3). Furthermore, Article No.47 of the same law, states that the academic staff conducts teaching, scientific and applied research, institution development services, consultation and advice to students and administrative tasks. Relations between the different activities are defined in the internal regulations of the higher education institutions and are part of the contracts between the parties (p.26).

A specific chapter of the Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Albania is devoted to scientific research. Article No. 69 of this chapter states that: “higher education institutions conduct basic scientific research or applied research and development projects, other creative activities in the manner specified in the statute of the higher education institution, according to the specific objectives of the institution in these areas” (p.37). What is more, the research and development activities and projects carried out in higher education institutions aim at the improvement of the quality of higher education in general.

The development of research activities and projects is extremely important because it: (i) provides students with methodological skills to better prepare them to conduct research; (ii) offers opportunities to link advanced scientific research and practical knowledge with various academic disciplines; (iii) facilitates academic staff qualification and further professional development; (iv) provides means for the improvement of the overall performance of the institution and its development (p.37).

Article No. 70 of the Law places a particular emphasis on the integration of research with teaching (p.37-38). However the law recognizes the right of higher education institutions to determine the topics of research, trends and volume of research work. To do this, institutions take into account the development needs of the country, the importance of research on the education of students, scientific cooperation programs, the training of the academic staff and financial resources available (p.37). In addition to the Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Albania, the Ministry of Education and Science (MASH) has also approved the National Strategy for Higher Education for the period between 2008 and 2013. MASH has also drafted the Regulation on Ethics in Research and Publishing. In March 2011, MASH approved the state standards on the quality evaluation and accreditation of academic programmes of the first, second and third cycle of studies in the higher education institutions in Albania.

## **Results and discussions: Scientific research in the European University of Tirana**

Drawing from the philosophy, principles and standards of the Bologna Process and the legal framework on higher education in Albania, the European University of Tirana (UET) has created a dedicated system to conduct, monitor, evaluate and promote scientific research. This is reflected in all

documentary and regulatory system of this university. In the Article No. 5 of the Statute of the university is written that: “UET is a higher education institution that conducts teaching and research. It combines teaching and scientific research, being organized or independent, in an integrated manner and in accordance with lesson plans” (UET, 2010, p.3).

Furthermore, the vision of UET is: “to be a leading university in the development of knowledge in the Albanian society; a centre of excellence in the academic formation of our students; a centre of expertise in the social, political, legal and economic studies in the country with a wider impact in region and beyond; as well as a centre of excellence in scientific research according to the areas of expertise within the university (p.3). Whereas, in the Article No. 6 of this same Statute the mission of the university is defined as follows: “to provide students with quality education, informed by the results of scientific research; to serve the Albanian society through knowledge creation and dissemination, teaching processes, creativity and adoption of the best scientific achievements as well as through the development of interrelations with the labour market and international partnership (p.3).

The members of the academic staff of UET have the right, and at the same time the duty, to: (i) publish free of charge their research work at the UET academic journals, at least two scientific articles per year; (ii) participate in at least 2 (two) conferences annually organized by UET and others, preferably abroad; (iii) manage and/or work in groups to develop research projects as approved by the Scientific Council of the Faculty and the Rector (p.24). In addition, the university allows senior academic to take time off work every 7 (seven) for period up to a year to engage in intensive research and work on their own academic progress. This right shall be acquired through a specific project or publication. This period is paid and the member of academic staff is released from teaching duties (p.24).

UET has established the *Office for Project Development and Research*, which supports and coordinates activities related to research projects at an institutional level; it offers other units of the University information and assistance necessary for the design, application and implementation of research projects, and maintains communication with donors at home and abroad. A vice-rector is in charge only for scientific research (UET, 2010, p.9; UET, 2011a, p.4). In addition, the University has established various *Research Institutes* and/or *Research Centres* (UET, 2010, p.7).

The focus of the university is the development of research projects and conducting scientific research activities that serve the needs of the Albanian society, contribute to quality education and teaching processes within the university and provide financial income. The scientific research pillars in UET are defined by the Council of Professors and are led by the heads of each scientific area. These are organized in accordance with the pyramidal structure of the university, i.e. dissertations leaders, micro thesis leaders and leaders of paper degrees in a specific field. In addition, the University allows for the contribution of not only professors, but also doctoral students, students of excellence of Master and Bachelor level (UET, 2011b, p.43).

## **Measurement of scientific research in UET**

The analysis of the main statutory and regulatory documents of the university reveals that the measurement of scientific research work of the academic staff at UET is done on the basis of scientific research products, such as (p.43):

- the individual contribution of each lecturer in research conducted in UET according to areas of expertise and research topics,
- the individual contribution of each lecturer in the research that takes place in institutions outside UET, at home and abroad,
- publication of books or monographs with scientific object, as single author or part of a group of authors,
- scientific publishing in foreign scientific periodicals with editorial board and 'peer review', especially in journals with impact factor, as well as in scientific journals of UET,
- presentation of reports, papers or scientific lectures at international scientific conferences with 'peer review' and proceedings publications as well as scientific conferences organized in UET,
- development of methodologies and models for scientific work for UET or for third parties, only required by the groups/entities, as statistical models, platform studies, mathematical algorithms, processing questionnaires, etc.,
- provision of scientific expertise to UET or contracted by third parties through UET,
- scientific reports on current development at home and abroad, contracted by a third party through UET,
- "Policy Paper" designed for UET, or by third parties contracted through UET,
- research work that contributes to the development of the academic activities such as lesson plans for the second and third cycle, etc. for UET or contracted by third parties through UET,
- conception of scientific platforms and organization of conferences, symposiums and other scientific activities, according to the calendar of scientific activities in UET,
- translations and editing of fundamental theoretical works, accompanied by the relevant scientific packages required by UET or accepted for publication by UET.

The evaluation of the scientific research of the internal the academic staff members is conducted every two years.

### **The main dimensions of the scientific research in UET**

The main dimensions of the scientific research in the University are the following (UET Brochure: Article C, paragraph 1, item 4): first, publication of periodical scientific journals. The purpose of UET scientific journals is to publish scientific research work of academic staff of UET and other external researchers, being Albanians or foreigners, with outstanding contributions in the relevant field of research. Secondly, the scientific journals seek to promote scientific debate among the academic community in UET and at the higher academic sphere at large in Albania and in the region. The Faculty of Economy and Information Technology publishes its scientific journal "Economicus"; the Faculty of Law publishes "Jus & Justicia" and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Education has three scientific journals: "Polis", covering topics in politics and international relations; "Sociological Analysis" and "Educatio" (the last two are published in English).

These scientific journals are each published twice a year in B5 format, between 120 - 150 pages, under the direction of the respective editor in chief and Editorial Board. The Chairman and Editorial Board ensure compliance of papers to the strict scientific criteria and the academic standards of UET scientific journals, as well as a qualitative evaluation and fair selection process for all the papers submitted for publication. Nonetheless, UET lecturers' papers have priority for publication for the same assessment taken during the "peer review".

The participation in publications is encouraged for doctoral candidates as well as on special occasions for Master students, in all cases ensuring compliance with scientific criteria and the academic standards. Thematic numbers are encouraged, addressing in particular the issue and phenomena of interest to the fields of study in UET. Thematic numbers must be reconciled with the subject of conferences organized by the relevant Faculty. They contain the underlying proceedings of the conference in question.

The second main dimension is that of scientific conferences. Each department should organize at least one scientific activity per year in the form of a scientific conference. International scientific conferences are encouraged. Scientific Conferences are announced at the beginning of the academic year, being placed on the calendar of UET scientific activities.

The participation in the conference of doctoral candidates, Master students, and in certain cases Bachelor students is encouraged, in all cases ensuring compliance with scientific criteria and academic standards.

Per each conference it is required for the respective Dean of the Faculty, the respective Head of the Department and all the relevant Department professors to participate as well as 75% of students of a given study programme, which is administered by the department that organises the conference. After each conference, the Department performs meeting with detailed analysis of its results, and compiles on a Scientific Conference Report.

The third dimension is that of scientific publications. UET encourages internal professors to publish scientific books facilitated by the publishing house UET Press. These publications should be authentic and subject to academic criteria; should be of interest and value to UET research areas; must be original or adaptations of previous works (or essay topics; master thesis, doctorate, etc.).

Academic staff members are entitled in the fifth year of the relationship with the university to benefit a paid leave semester (sabbatical semester) in order to conduct research projects and be able to enjoy an appropriate academic recovery in accordance with the academic structures of the university and agreement with the employer. In this case, the research project results and related scientific material are approved by the Faculty Council and the Board for Research Activities Financing and are published by UET Press, according to the procedures in place.

UET Press publishing activity lies on four main lines: (i) translation of the most renowned textbooks in the western university world; (ii) publication of scientific monographs prepared by UET professors or others in the Albanian academia at large. These works should be authentic, in compliance with strict academic and research criteria. Materials are approved in advance by "peer review" and then are subject to the UET Press publishing rules; (iii) publications of university books prepared for teaching purposes by the UET professors themselves; (iv) publications in collaboration with third parties. UET Press can publish books, textbooks, monographs, etc., in collaboration with other entities, previously supported on a specific agreement, strictly applying the respective principles, policies and procedures. The "peer review" system is used for the evaluation of the research and scientific work prior to publication, subject to anonymous evaluation by other researchers in the same field of study, based on the approved formats.

The fourth dimension is that of scientific projects. The engagement of the academic staff and students in research projects is supported by the Office for Project Development and Research and its partners. Scientific project, in principle, are conceptualized and developed by the professors, senior and junior

scholars in UET, in cooperation with other partners and facilitated by the Office for Project Development and Research. The latter has in place procedures for project application, fundraising, implementation and monitoring. UET press serves as a promoting tool for the scientific research in the University. It is the responsible unit for the publication of scientific work in accordance with all procedures and standards of book publishing.

### **Standardization of the scientific research in UET**

The analysis of regulatory and statutory documents of the University, demonstrates that UET has in place clear procedures for the management of scientific research and related activities in accordance with its statute and other regulatory forms as follows (UET Brochure: Annex 1):

- the Individual Plan Form for scientific research,
- the Department Plan Form for scientific research,
- the verification form of the fulfilment of the criteria for scientific conferences organization,
- the Conference Evaluation Form for the participants in the scientific conferences in UET,
- the paper evaluation forms,
- the certification form for translation, etc.

### **Recommendations**

Scientific research in Albania constitutes already one of the main dimensions of the activity of the higher education institutions, being public or private. In this light, it is necessary to create a more favourable financing scheme for higher education institutions, particularly for the private ones, through the improvement of the legal framework and policies on higher education in Albania. The scientific research should not be deemed as an aim in itself, it should include students and its results must be reflected in the content of study programs. Scientific research also needs to be oriented towards the labour market and the academic staff should respond to the needs of the Albanian economy and the business sector, because “a more market-oriented system of higher education can do much better than the state-dominated model” (“The best”, 2005, p.12). Scientific research and progress should be clearly reflected in the academic staff obligations, even in their individual contracts with the institution.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the UET scientific research model shows that UET has adopted the most advanced Western models and the best practices from the Anglo-Saxon universities and thus its scientific research is based upon four main principles: (i) the connection and reflection of scientific research activities in the teaching process; (ii) the students’ involvement in research activities; (iii) further qualification of academic staff including doctoral candidates; (iv) the connection between the market and scientific research.

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