

# Shaping New Paradigms in the Higher Education Development: Dilemmas for Transitional Countries

*Denisa Krbec*

*Faculty of Economics and Tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković" in Pula  
University of Rijeka, Croatia*

[dkrbec@efpu.hr](mailto:dkrbec@efpu.hr)

## Abstract

Higher education in Croatia, as well in the other transitional countries, is undergoing significant changes. Those reforming activities affect not only institutions directly but also their relationship to society at large. Recognizing that higher education plays also a crucial role in the various aspects of transitional transformation, many scientist and expert's reviews place it in the current political, economic, cultural and social environment in which they operate. In this sense, and despite the specific reform start-point of each country, there is a general consensus on the need for regional cooperation. According the Bologna Declaration, the CEE countries need certain compatibility, which means certain similar structures of the educational system in order to strengthening the educational structure of the CEE region.

This paper reviews different aspects of higher education challenges. Among many others, the use of IT in higher education effectively requires good tactics as well as a sensible strategy.

**Keywords:** HE development, social inventions, transition, HITRA.

## Introduction

A number of European experts argue that tight central planning and control of higher education generally has resulted in uniformity and rigidity of higher education systems at the moment when diversity, responsiveness and an emphasis on quality and relevance are essential. Some of higher education systems in the transitional countries have used a combination of bureaucratic regulation and market forces as key tools of governance as of late.

Most of the higher education policies today are directly affected by global trends and pressures as well as by demands to introduce market principles in higher education at home. Croatia is certainly not alone in implementing such policy of higher education (meaning: social effectiveness, accountability, quality of education, equality of opportunity in access etc.). In the global educational network characterized with information highways and contemporary challenges to the economy, a traditional university faces new challenges in providing education and information services to interested parties. The challenges are even more pronounced in a transitional economy such is Croatian or Slovenian or any other transitional economy. The recent controversy arises from the collision between autonomy and accountability where there has been an increase in accountability of academic institutions.

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## Initial Reform's Framework

According to Svarc (2002) both Croatian higher education and scientific research sector have the specific purposes, which we may put in the present

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period of transition. Key-components of the transitional societies become to be:

- (1) *knowledge production* - the generation of *new* knowledge which enlarge the *existing pool* of knowledge;
- (2) *knowledge transmission* - the process of education and training of the labor forces which creates the "*stock of human capital*", and
- (3) *knowledge transfer*- process of dissemination of knowledge and new technologies and learning how to apply new technologies in production processes and throughout the economy.

Looking at it another way, the importance of higher education also depends on the perception of its functionality (von Tilburg, 2001). Their functionality is defined by different system's functional strategies significant for different role aspects of education (education as a system, as a societal process, as a cluster for organizations or organization's behavior, or a cluster of persons/personal relationships with different goals).

Among specific and general aims of education also, we may actually make the comparison between (A) adjusting youngsters to societal requirements, and (B) HE role in the society's transformation. According to Sen (1999) education in general gives individuals opportunity to become "free", which is a prerogative for any further strategy of social development. OECD documents on educational policies in CEE countries also highlight education placement in the context of the current political, economic, cultural, and social environment in which they operate (see for example: CEPS Europe South-East Monitor at < <http://www.oecd.org/els/emerging/education> >).

A central feature of the sociological approach is the recognition of the most important basic goals in reforming the system of higher education. University education is a subtle and complex process of *production*. At *international level* the perception of the functionality of higher education can result in improving their social role for specific country "on the global platform, indirectly giving the same benefits as at the national level" (von Tilburg, 2001:5).

Regardless of the role of the national HE system in the global context, the contemporary requirements for adoptable institutions of higher education assume scholarly interaction within and between countries, frequent curriculum reviews, and strong links to the world stock of knowledge. According the Bologna Declaration, the CEE countries need certain compatibility, which means certain similar structures of the educational system in order to strengthening the educational structure of the CEE region.

Among basic goals of the HE's system reforms of many countries in CEE region, precisely established (international) standards should *improve the European cooperation* by insuring the needed *quality of higher education* with application of the comparable criteria and accepted methodology. In this sense, all recommendations of professional groups of the Council of Europe, CRE or EUA (regarding the financing, organization and quality) have to be respected (Krbec, 2002 a). (Thematic Reviews of Educational Policy have been carried out for 9 countries – Albania, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia /FYROM, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia – and they are available on the Internet sites of the Task Force < <http://www.see-educoop.net> > . Additionally, each section of these reports provide an analysis of the whole educational system, followed by statistics and other issues related to ongoing reforms and present recommendations.)

## The Challenges of Higher Education and Research Industry

The first document on national level which makes the official framework for the implementation of the overall national innovation system in Croatia was the *National Scientific Research Program 1996-1998* (NSRP) proposed by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and accepted by the Croatian Parliament in February 1996.

After that initial step, the Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia has made a number of commitments relevant to higher education, science and innovation in two recent White Papers: "Higher Education Research and Industry in Croatia" (May 2000) and "Croatian Program for Innovative Technological Development - HITRA" (April 2001).

The challenges of higher education and research industry can be considered as a result of various views and developmental orientations that have coincided:

### **Strategic Orientation**

The starting point of HITRA is a true orientation to create environment for both general and individual welfare. In the context of this Program for strategic orientation, a general welfare implies spiritual satisfaction of the community followed by all comforts of the contemporary civilization.

### **International Environment Tendencies**

Globalization is a relatively recent, widely used concept referring to a variety of socio-economic and cultural processes. The term '*globalization*' has persistently become the key concept in numerous socio-economic analysis and policy studies of growth and development of nation-states and regions all around the globe. Formal interpretations and implications (eg. UNESCO, EURYDICE and many others) have generated several broad issues and questions pertaining to the positioning of education in the globalized context.

Following that, most of the nation's educational systems are forced to respond to the challenge of the globalization phenomenon. Those challenges of diverse forms of globalization are neither *new* nor inevitable for scientists and also for policymakers. One of these forms is certainly ***the necessity for criteria standardization of social intervention*** (or *social invention*) within, and partially outside of, the circle of the EU's Member States. Main demand is very clear: efficiency in the (educational) service giving.

Under the motto "Innovation, research and development of new technologies, products, processes, services and markets have no alternative" (August 2000), the HITRA represents an approach for Croatian further active participation in the higher education and research environment. This is, no doubt, needed strategic step in the science-based innovation processes. An expanding network system of interactive processes is generated as universities (or different faculties itself), industry, and government engage to promote economic development and academic research.

### **Entrepreneurial Initiatives**

Raising entrepreneurial initiatives in the Croatian academic and research community can be created from this constellation encompasses and transcends previous traditional academic missions of education and research. The mission of overall social development and improvement must be added to that of the reproduction of the knowledge base and the systematic production of scientific novelty (Etzkowitz, 2001). The educational entrepreneurship favors empowerment, capability, teams, flexibility, competition, and achievement over the more traditional models of management.

According to Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz (2001), "innovation requires agencies competent and able to assess the possibilities contained in a given situation and aware of the fact that the assessment can always be made more *knowledge-intensive*". They offered The Triple Helix thesis that contains some original views of the creating knowledge infrastructure. In the light of these challenges, their opinion about the university's new role is especially interesting for transitional countries. One of the concluding remarks defines a new role of the university as a ***knowledge-industry***, both in its internal development and in stimulating innovation in the larger society.

## **Transformation**

The organizational innovations are sometimes extensions of technology, meaning technological solutions rather than overall technology policy. Because the "scientific and technological policy, side by side, present a basic orientation of this administration ... this Program creates an environment for active layers of society with the best education and greatest prosperity to find its place in a broad spectrum of creating knowledge-based small and medium enterprises" (HITRA, 2001: 1,5).

Following this, Croatian universities, faculties, and research institutes become agencies of economic and social development, building upon its previous missions of teaching and research.

Like not-for-profit institutions (social institutions rather than organizations), faculties/schools are forced to adopt entrepreneurial strategies that gradually change their *organizational culture*. This culture change involves changes of both ideologies and organizational forms. Among three types of organizational culture changes, the transitional impacts on school's systems provoke relatively fast, comprehensive change. However, it's a form of cultural innovation (Krbec, 2002).

## **Applicability**

Besides the orientation towards new knowledge, HITRA directs scientific research towards its applicability, and materialization of ideas into products, processes, services and markets.

At the national level, the relation among orientations/actions explained above is *interactive*. The necessity to restructure institutional relations is *caused* by the knowledge-intensity of the economic development (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 2001).

## **Instead of Conclusion**

Regardless of whether a broader higher educational reform is at work or it concerns the reconstruction of a specific part of educational process, organizational and also technological solutions yet applied in schools/faculties are able to influence qualitative shifts in "producing" process of education. This also means that the introduction and the implementation of contemporary solutions certainly contributes to a different, *reform-oriented* type of learning.

The specific situation of many CEE countries which have had to face wars (like Croatia or Macedonia) or any other disruption in the past years as well as the transformation's difficulties of transition constitute an unenviable but necessary challenge to advanced activities of the local governments. Society's goals are generally intended for the higher education and research industry as a whole. The main social goals for institutions of higher education – for example, to stimulate the widest possible exchange of students through the credit system, but also to include the lifelong learning, which should help in overcoming the consequences of economic restructurings (on the example of transitional countries), i.e. the risk of structural (un)employment – do not require that every school or faculty be open to students of all ability levels. The specific national reform's goals are not necessary characterized in terms analogous to the essential goal of service's production to maximize the "level of knowledge".

Presently, it is evident that a state with current prerogatives can purposefully respond to educational and scientific initiatives to painless adapt the HE's system to the newest requirement of science, education and social environment in general. Present obstacles can be resolved if the Ministry of Science and Technology, as the first state administration's representative responsible for the implementation of reform's solutions, retains only tasks of creating obligatory regulation's competencies.

Overall, the orientations and needed actions outlined in this paper could result in a number of long-term benefits to the higher education and science industry.

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## Biography

Professor Krbec is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Economics and Tourism in Pula. Prof. Krbec's research interests include the sociological analysis of education, and also the organizational aspects of transformation/reforming educational institutions. She's currently a Member of Expert Group for Reforming Croatian Higher Education (Ministry of Education, Government of Croatia) and also a Member of Expert Group for Curriculum Improvement at the University of Rijeka (Rector's Office). She also works in the area of social policy, as well as public policies and public management.