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NEW CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL EDUCATION: A PRECONDITION FOR SOCIAL WELFARE OR A THREAT TO LABOUR MARKET?

Abstract

The centuries-long struggle for the right to education has come to face other challenges in the age of globalized networks and assumed equal opportunities. Despite the popularization of universities and introduction of common standards called to simplify student mobility and mutual recognition of study certificates/diplomas, higher education no longer represents a general precondition for social equality, welfare or guarantee, given the increasing supply of high-skilled professionals and decreasing demand on the labour market. Recent tendencies and interest in mass education in relatively popular disciplines result in the overproduction of qualified specialists without meeting the hiring capacities of the global market. Former insurmountable barriers to world markets have now been eliminated due to different waves and aspects of globalization. To withstand the ever-growing competition and evolving tendencies, it is essential to have an approximate vision for the choice of one's future profession, bearing in mind that it should go beyond national borders and employ the concept of becoming a "global employee". Pursuing this goal, a huge gap appears between the younger and the older generation that had to undergo various stages of transformation influenced by geopolitical and socio-economic changes, technological development and market requirements. A graduate from a country with a developing economy, having received a degree from a prestigious university abroad, has to face the problem of migration, because in the majority of cases the home country is not capable of offering a well-paid position to such a high-skilled specialist with immense potential, labelling the applicant as overqualified for the local job market. The opposite phenomenon deals with another negative aspect of mass education, which degrades the interest in learning services and handicraft skills, thus boosting the increase in demand, as a result of which making the roustabout jobs more popular and better paid. As the modern issues of higher education and the demands of the labour market are gradually increasing, it is of vital importance to combine the efforts of the international community so as to overcome these drawbacks and find appropriate solutions in order to provide sustainable development for such major social problems.

Keywords: European education, labour market, popularization of education, global challenges, world order

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Introduction

In the recent decades the developed countries of the western hemisphere tend to westernize the rest of the world or introduce their vision of democratic development through various tools and means. One of the widely used devices that has proved to be effective for the developing nation-states, striving for western standardization on the one hand, but which has also been highly criticized for “demolishing” local customs and traditions on the other hand, is education.

The trends of Europeanization, Americanization or the modern umbrella word for both – westernization, in certain aspects also globalization – are thought to be the driving forces that introduce neoliberal democratic reforms in the third-world countries with the aim of ameliorating the latter’s social and economic welfare, thus boosting the rise in financial indices, stabilizing the markets and establishing grounds for sound competition.

Recent tendencies and interest in mass education result in overproduction of qualified specialists without meeting the hiring capacities of both the local and the global market. The growing challenge of similar socio-economic issues will force the global community to face rational reforms and intercontinental collaboration aiming at a “win-win” game in order to have an educated society, low level of labour migration and a social welfare.

1. Re-thinking of Higher Education in the Current World System

The centuries-long struggle for equal gender rights and the right to education has faced another great challenge in the era of capitalism, as while the basic right of citizens is protected – owing to widespread access to education – at the same time it is hindered by its inaccessibility to everyone due to high fees and high requirements in terms of intellectual differences. As a rough example peculiar to our times can be the growing popularity of IT. Taking the above-mentioned criticism of high demands as well as differences in disciplinary talents and abilities, not everyone willing to become an IT specialist can enter the department of a competitive university having little or no potential in the field, but being more skilful in humanitarian sciences. Nevertheless, this option is not excluded in certain cases if the applicant can afford paying excessive fees and all the related costs throughout the study years.

The pursuit of welfare and secure future faces another problem, which had not represented a serious issue before the emergence of hi-tech industrialized globalization. In particular, this refers to a very responsible choice to be made when still a teenager – which specialization to choose to be sure that in 5–10 years' time it will still be demanded on the labour market.

Former insurmountable barriers to world markets are eliminated now, which means that the vision for a future profession should go beyond national borders and employ the concept of becoming a “global employee” on the constantly evolving, globalized labour market.

The popularization of university education does not in fact simplify an individual's access to the world of knowledge – just the opposite, it creates competition, of which there are two outcomes – either the “natural selection”¹ when the smartest wins or the “imbalance of power” when the richest pays. Consequently, this phenomenon not only brings forward the notion of social inequality in the era of freedom of choice and the right for education, but also gives rise to the decline on the labour market, bringing more supply than demand.

Nevertheless, despite all the injustice and diversified opinions concerning the inequality in the right to education, there is a growing tendency at the leading world universities to allocate scholarships for bright minds from developing countries or to generally make higher education free of charge.

Last year when Germany abolished tuition fees² for university students, including foreigners, the country's popularity grew even more not only among students from developing countries, but also from the highly developed countries of the world. Smart students from the United States and the United Kingdom who could not afford their education in their home institutions because of high fees and student loans tried their luck at German universities. This was a major step towards the country's commitment to universal education on one hand and a very carefully considered policy on the other. Why? The reason is that skilled labour force who concentrated more on studies during the student years can pay off better to the government than those who had to pay student loans, but in most cases failed to do so³. Besides, this new policy minimized, even nullified, the chances of being accepted “thanks to the parents' purses”, rather increased the competition among prospective students who from then on had to rely

¹ Metaphorically referring to Charles Darwin's evolution theory of “natural selection” and development “in the fight for survival”, as well as the social phenomena of “Social Darwinism”.

² Lower Saxony was the last German state to abolish the education fee in October 2014.

³ In March 2014 *The Guardian* reported that students failed to pay tuition loans, especially when the fees got tripled, thus making the government lose more than it would have gained by having left the fees at the same rate.

on their own intellect and knowledge. As *The Independent* published, “we do not want higher education which depends on the wealth of the parents”⁴. Quite a rational choice to account for future qualified specialists!

Such a model of democratization and commitment to education proves another phenomenon of hegemony that certain central governments try to retain by means of attracting perspective minds and somehow replacing the existing waves of local population’s migration with higher skilled immigrant labour. In this perspective we can emphasize the multidisciplinary approach and the social change analyzed by Wallerstein in his world-systems⁵ theory and the division of labour. In his vision, this system has a single division of labour within one world market, which has its peculiarities depending on the position of the country in the world-system (Wallerstein 2004). He divides the world into core states, semi-peripheral areas and peripheral areas, where the core states concentrate on higher-skill labour, capital-intensive production and appropriation of much of the surplus of the world economy; peripheral areas, on the contrary, focus on low-skill, labour-intensive production and extraction of raw materials. Semi-peripheral areas stand somewhere in between, being less dependent on the core states and having more diversified economies (Wallerstein 1974a, 1974b).

Thus, what do we get? Core states, in our case, economically developed European countries with leading universities and a unified system of higher education, invest their standards in developing countries or attract foreign students with high potential to develop their skills and adjust their mentality to that of the European, pursuing the aim to a) either enrich their labour market with well-trained and high-skilled labour force, or b) upon the return of these young people to their home countries count on the dissemination of European standards and the rise of democratic values. This phenomenon is either perceived positively, due to the “public good” it performs and the intent to increase the level of awareness and world cognition, or is criticized (mainly by Eurosceptics) as an indirect interference with the sovereignty of another state, financial and technological penetration as a result of unbalanced economy and unequal balance of power, or simply the violation of local customs, traditions and values.

Meanwhile, the third option depicts quite an interesting scenario, which probably is not seriously considered when the study program/curriculum/scholarship is designed. After being trained, educated and experienced in the spirit of European values and high-skilled labour demands, a graduate returns to his/her home country, which is usually a developing economy, and faces the global problem of unemployment, but, here is the curious thing, not because of the lack of vacancy, but because of the lack of

⁴ The quote of Gabrielle Heinen-Kjajic, Lower Saxony’s Minister for Science and Culture.

⁵ According to Immanuel Wallerstein “a world-system is not the system of the world, but a system that is a world”.

an appropriate position and an employer's fear that the applicant being overqualified will change the job because of a low salary or that he/she may become a serious competitor in the future.

2. Popularization of Universities, or Imbalance Between Demand and Supply

“Under the EU system of multilevel governance, social policy is the competence of nation-states. Yet at the national level, path-dependent forces, specifically the impact of “lock-in-effects” and increasing returns (Piersen 2000: 251–267) built into both the politics and the programs of the welfare state make it difficult to introduce change” (Cox 2012: 17). This is especially true for the developing countries, among them the ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) and EaP (Eastern Partnership countries). Some of these partner countries are eager to make radical reforms and introduce all the necessary changes to make the approximation with the western standards and education system as soon as possible, whereas some others prefer to avoid fundamentalism and maintain local values in the scientific upbringing of the younger generation. However, it should be noted that starting from 2005–2006 the European Credit Transfer System and the Bologna Declaration got adopted by many countries which are still in the list of developing economies. With this initiative such countries meant to follow the modern trends of globalization by simplifying the process of youth exchanges, mutual recognition of diplomas and adaptation of new teaching methodologies, thus keeping the pace with modernity. Despite a seemingly simple procedure, the process of transformation could not have been that smooth, since the conversion from the Soviet system of education into the European, as in case of Armenia for instance, required quite extensive efforts.

The transformation was rather challenging, as alongside with the socio-economic aspect which included the publication of up-to-date books, handbooks and other teaching materials, the provision of new technological equipment etc., it also required a change of mentality, a varied set of training for teachers and professors, who for decades having used teaching methods different from today's standards had to undergo radical changes. A whole generation, who witnessed two totally different methodologies and standards of education and work, became “prey” to these fundamental changes. Becoming kind of a “guinea pig” of social changes, this generation, alongside with the previous one, became incompatible with the new demands. This can be the result of

the “lock-in-effect” discussed above, social hardships and the “closed” society, which undergoes modification and transformation as generations change.

Thus, as suggested by Verillaud, the impact of globalization on the higher education shaped three major trends: a) the increase in international mobility, b) the economic competition, and c) the competition amongst academic and research institutions. According to him, the modern facets of education are believed to add significant strength to today’s economies based on how well they can harness the knowledge and expertise of the higher education system, which determines the adaptability of the country’s economy to the swiftly changing markets and technologies (Verillaud 2008). As already discussed at the beginning of the paper, one of the main challenges of these new trends of mobility and global markets is the ability to predict the “global” profession in demand.

If during the Cold War era one specialization/higher education was enough to earn one’s living, now an employee needs to possess multiple skills, speak several languages, have years of work experience, in certain cases two or more majors, etc. To illustrate this, let me give an example. Ten years ago in Armenia having a higher education in media communications and journalism, a graduate could find a well-paid position in the emerging new field of Public Relations, which mainly required linguistic education and experience in article/press-release writing. Today many companies hiring PR specialists demand excellent knowledge of marketing and design skills alongside with linguistics and communications major (which is an apparent contradiction on one hand “labelling” certain applicants as overqualified, on the other hand expecting them to be highly experienced), whereas certain universities offer a curriculum either in media/PR or in marketing/PR. Consequently only one diploma is not enough to find a prestigious job.

Another issue that comes up is whether the higher education pays off or not, given that there is an increase in supply and a significant decrease in demand. In the case of “core states” the situation is more or less clear: good professionals are still in demand, and in the majority of cases a specialist will find an appropriate employment with high wages. The image is different in emerging markets and “third world” countries. To illustrate, let’s observe the same example of a journalism specialist in Armenia. For a double-level degree (BA+MA), a tuition fee of about €1 thousand per year is required⁶, let alone other expenditures: study material, transportation, rent (if a student from a more remote area comes to study in the capital), etc. The average wages of a journalist in a newspaper or other media outlet range from AMD 70 thousand to 120 thousand (approximately 130–220 EUR). In contrast to this, a shop assistant or a call

⁶ The prices mentioned are average, since the tuition fees differ from institution to institution. In certain cases scholarships are awarded; besides, there exists a rotation system, according to which a student who earned the highest grades during the semester may study free of charge until the next rotation results, at which time their results will be reassessed and his tuition fees readjusted accordingly.

centre assistant with no higher education may get paid AMD 5 thousand (less than 10 EUR) per shift. Unfortunately, high living costs and low level of social welfare make certain students drop their studies and work to make a living.

The social phenomenon of popularization of higher education in Europe and abroad, accessibility and the existence of scholarships gives birth to a remarkable contrast: an increasing ambition to study abroad vs. a decreasing demand on the local labour market. As a result, in certain societies there is an oversupply of overqualified specialists, but no demand for them; instead there is a high demand for a specialist in household services, but practically no supply. Traditionally it is perceived that, for instance, a teacher, translator or lawyer and similar professions requiring higher professional education will be better paid, but vacancies for a welder, car mechanics or repairman are more in demand for higher wages.

The question arises how to deal with this situation and how to balance the demand and supply of high-skilled or low-skilled labour force on the labour market or make it more flexible?

The solution to this issue is intertwined in various sectors of local government and international cooperation. To address the challenges of global education and the overlap of similar curricula, many prestigious universities have been forming consortiums and global networks to equally distribute the demand for a specific profession in the given geographical area. As Rama suggests, the integration with the world market promises prosperity for developing economies, and the unleashing of the market forces associated with globalization should increase productivity and economic growth (Rama 2003), which can be accounted for by the equal distribution of sources based on cooperation agreements and exchange of labour force, raw materials, etc. He argues that different aspects of globalization have different consequences that can fall with openness to trade and rise with foreign direct investment, which in its turn increases the returns to education (Rama 2003).

To sum up, the intersection of education, employment and globalization intertwines with political, economic and social changes. The flow of capital and the increasing competition result in the inability of governments to address the global challenges much ahead, secure equal distribution of jobs, prevent labour migration and guarantee social welfare. Neo-liberal ideology, alongside with universal human rights, calls upon individuals to make use of their fundamental freedoms and develop human personality⁷. Knowledge, science and education have always shed light on the world and interweaved diverse networks of relations. Education is a form of precondition for civilization.

⁷ Article 26 (1, 2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at the Palais de Chaillot, Paris, on December 10, 1948.

Conclusions

The new opportunities of education in the context of globalization are meant to provide public good rather than evil. As every aspect of human existence, this also faces challenges, which can be overcome only in the course of experiment, time and development. The interconnectedness of the world now undergoes the process of systemization and gradual adaptation of new social policies to overcome such global problems as migration, unemployment and equal balance of high and low-skilled labour. It only remains to hope that wise cooperation among nation-states, trade unions, educational establishments and economic blocs will lead to sustainable development of higher education and global social welfare.

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