Reform of the higher education system in Slovenia: some preliminary considerations

Dr. Manja Klemenčič

Introduction

Slovenian higher education has gone through important changes in the last two decades. While much has been already accomplished, even more remains to be done. Globalisation, technological development and wider use of information and communication technologies, demographic shifts, and an ever advancing knowledge society are some of the key forces driving further changes in higher education around the world and thus press also for continue rethinking of Slovenian higher education space.

Globalisation puts pressure on business to become more competitive in the global market. Business, in turn, puts demands on higher education institutions - as producers and distributors of knowledge - to support them in this effort. Since globalisation means an increased worldwide circulation of information, capital, goods, services, and people, higher education institutions cannot remain unaffected. On the institutional level, they face an increase in international comparisons and international competition. Also their most vital parts - academics, researchers and students - are subject to an increased international competition: for research funding, publishing opportunities, mobility grants, etc. Information and communication technologies pose opportunities, but also organisational challenges in terms of implementation, maintenance and upgrading. This is the case in research, but also increasingly in pedagogical processes and administration of higher education provision. Slovenia like the rest of Europe is facing a rapid decline in birth rates, resulting in an inverse population pyramid with a shrinking proportion of 18-to-24-year-olds and a growing segment of the aging population. The demographic impact is likely to result in a decline of total student numbers before 2020, despite a growing demand for education generally and the rising number of mature students. The potential implications for higher education are vast: unless foreign students are being imported in large numbers, higher education institutions will

1 Some of the suggestions made in this contribution are based on my comments on the Pavel Zgaga's Draft Report on How should Europe handle the globalization? An educational perspective available at http://ceps.pef.uni-lj.si/knjiznica/doc/manja-klemencic.pdf.

2 Among various definitions of and perspectives on globalisation, I refer here to ‘economic globalisation’, that is the globalisation of economic processes: increased worldwide circulation of information, capital, goods, services, and people.
inevitably be reduced in numbers and size. Finally, with the recognition of knowledge as the key strategic resource in globalised knowledge-driven societies, the pressures on higher education from society to deliver relevant knowledge and competent graduates have been on the increase.

The planned reform of the Slovenian higher education will have to take these new circumstances fully into account. In the present reflection I discuss the areas of quality education and internationalisation which I have chosen on the basis of their relevance and in view of my personal competence to deliberate on these topics. I offer a set of recommendations on possible reforms in each of these two areas.

**Beyond the National Quality Assurance Agency**

The establishment of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency is a momentous decision in Slovenian higher education. While the key components concerning the functioning of the Agency are well thought-out and in line with the European directions, there three aspects related to quality I would like to put forward for further consideration.

**Investment towards enhanced quality of teaching and learning**

In European practice, the main task of QAA is to monitor quality with a focus on higher education institutions’ meeting the prescribed standards. These standards, however, reflect the lowest acceptable levels of quality. They are not necessarily geared towards encouraging institutions to further develop excellence that is beyond meeting the standards neither do they possess mechanisms for acknowledging or rewarding excellence or sharing of best practices.

Quality teaching and learning is at the center of HEIs’ responses to prepare students for employability and successful performance in the labour market and thus for responding effectively to the fast-changing demands of the market. In line with the idea of the multiple purposes of higher education as stated in the London Communiqué (2007), the essence of excellence in teaching and learning is also in preparing students for continuous personal development, and for active, responsible, ethically sensitive citizenship in democratic and increasingly diverse societies. This is by no means an easy task. It is surprising that advancing
the quality of teaching and learning rarely features on the top of institutional and national higher education policy agenda.

Slovenian higher education institutions, like most in Europe, are lacking a comprehensive institutional strategy on the quality of teaching and learning. And in all honesty we cannot claim all academics at our higher education institutions excel in teaching. The reason for this is surely not that they are purposefully careless or that they do not spend enough time preparing, but rather that they – like their counterparts elsewhere - are often not trained as educators. Academics do wish to be good educators and they do care about how successful they in teaching, but the problem is that they either are not aware about problems in their teaching or they do not know how to notably improve their teaching. The solution is in developing institutional practices that will carefully evaluate teaching and student learning, create incentives for academics to improve their teaching and support them in this effort. The practice in a number of leading universities such as Harvard or MIT is to have a university centre for the advancement of teaching and learning. Such centres have the following functions: collaboration to strengthen instruction both inside and outside the classroom; support for the development and assessment of innovative pedagogies, educational technologies, and curricula, and research in the learning process.³

There also exist several examples of national centres of excellence in teaching and learning⁴ that offer mechanisms for the identification, development, and dissemination of good individual and institutional practice in learning and teaching. Taking account of these examples, my recommendation is to consider setting up a national centre or institute for excellence in teaching and learning – either under the auspices of the Agency or as an independent institution. Such a centre would offer mechanisms for collaboration and benchmarking with the objective of supporting strategic change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching, including curriculum development and assessment.

³ Taken from MIT's Teaching and Learning Laboratory.
⁴ The (UK) Institute for Learning and Teaching (http://www.ilt.ac.uk/); Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (USA)(http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/); Australian Council for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (http://www.altc.edu.au/). Similar centres can also be found in Sweden and Finland.
Among initiatives of such centre could be grants for promoting scholarship and research on learning and teaching. Topics that should be particularly addressed within this area include: (i) training of doctoral students in pedagogy to develop teaching skills; (ii) developing assessment methods and supporting software; and; (iii) exploring and innovating in new learning environments and methods (to accommodate more flexible ways of learning). The centre would cooperate with institution-based teaching and learning units and support development of these in institutions that do not yet have them.

Another possible initiative could be a call to higher education institutions to nominate individual programs, units, departments, sections, centres for a distinction in excellence of teaching and learning. The nominating organisations would be asked to submit a report containing a description and analysis of the particular teaching and learning practice, together with evidence for significant benefits to student learning based on the institutional (and national) objectives for attainment of learning outcomes. The underlying motive here is to raise the profile and encourage recognition of the fundamental importance of teaching in higher education. Those institutions obtaining a distinction would apart from a symbolic award also receive positive publicity, and others could learn from their practice.

**Information and communication technologies and their use in higher education**

Dramatic advancements in, and the spread of the use of, information and communication technologies have changed the world of business and commerce and are changing also higher education. The precondition for utilising these technologies in higher education is that higher education institutions themselves are “learning institutions”, i.e. that they are willing and able to learn about possible usage and experiment with including them in everyday use in all aspects of institutional operations. Another precondition is that all users within the academic community, i.e. students, academics and administrative staff are “multimedia literate”, and that they have opportunities for continuous training in this area.

Perhaps the most significant impact of technology has been and will be on teaching. A recent survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit reports that not only will technological innovation
have a major influence on teaching methodologies; it will also become a core differentiator in attracting students and corporate partners.\(^5\)

With the availability of ICT, learning is no longer constrained by resources physically contained in universities: open sources, Wikipedia and new media forms offer new opportunities for learning pathways that can complement the resources of educational establishments. This access to global educational and reference resources – resources that go far beyond local library catalogues and lecture-notes provided by professors at home institution – is perhaps the single most important aspect of how ICT has and will continue to influence higher education. Furthermore, advanced technology offers infinite solutions to new ways of teaching and learning. It is an imperative for academics to take these into account when designing their course curricula if they are to help students develop competences needed for technology-driven and supported markets and societies. According to the Economist survey results, online-collaboration tools, software that supports individually paced learning and learning-management systems are among the communications technologies most expected to improve academics over the next five years.\(^6\) It is thus paramount that sufficient priority and funding is given to the area of ICT usage in teaching and learning, especially in terms of support of educational innovation, but also training for academics to be able to take advantage of these technologies in their teaching and research. It might be particularly challenging to motivate academics of the generation that has not grown up “digital”, but will remain active in education for the next decade or two, to experiment with new technologies. Here, the availability of training and individual support for designing teaching methodologies, as well as incentives in terms of promotion, could play an important role.

Distance education is gaining momentum at higher education institutions across the world. It is seen as a particularly advantageous form of education for mature students who, given their work and family commitments, seek education less constrained in terms of time and locations. Today, Slovenian teenagers, as teenagers across the globe, are growing up “digital”. They use mobile phones, iPod, enjoy computer games and cannot imagine life without the internet. They are also much better in foreign languages than was the case with


\(^6\) Ibid.
previous generations. As such, they are well-equipped to seek formal tertiary education via
distance learning also abroad. In addition, as the Economist study point out, US and other
universities are leveraging advanced technologies to put education within reach of individuals
around the world.\(^7\) If Slovenian higher education institutions are to stay on course with the
rest of the world and remain competitive they need to develop distance education as a diverse
mode of education provision.

While distance education, the opportunity to collaborate with research partners from around
the world, and advanced program solutions for management operations of higher education
institutions offer massive advantages to the higher education institutions, they also incur
substantial cost in terms of maintenance and training of support staff as well as users.
Government support for such strategic infrastructural investments will certainly be needed.
As the Economist study points out, corporate-academic partnerships will also have to form an
increasing part of the institutions’ effort when locating funding and controlling costs of full
usage of advanced technologies.

Finally, one issue concerning information and communication technologies has to be added.
It is of paramount importance to expand national broadband network to ensure that every
household in Slovenia, and thus every student in tertiary education, has high-speed internet
connection. This is a massive investment for the country, but I am advocating it without
hesitation in view of what I believe is our shared objective to improve Slovenia’s economic
potential.

*Voluntary courses for development of transferable competences*

One notable quality difference I have encountered in my personal academic path at major
universities abroad (Cambridge and Harvard) was the wealth of academic support services
offered to students, academics and administrative staff. Voluntary and freely available
courses for students, academics and administrators are available throughout the academic
year, tailored to the specific needs of different groups in the academic community and aiming

\(^7\) Ibid.
at these groups developing - at a higher level – transferable competences that are seen as 'needed for personal fulfilment, social inclusion and employment in a knowledge society'\textsuperscript{8}.

Students are taking advantage in particular of courses on: use of ICT, foreign languages, personal and career development (study skills, public speaking, argumentation and debate, writing a dissertation, publishing, presenting work at conferences, preparing for an interview, etc.), international and intercultural skills (e.g. studying in a foreign country and intercultural environment). For researchers and academics, group training and one-on-one clinics are offered in the areas of developing teaching methods, including how to use new technologies and create new learning environments, publishing, professional networking, time management, and research project management. Individual faculties and departments complement these services with discipline-specific training in research methods or discipline-specific academic writing. Courses offered to students and academics tend to be open also to administrators, while additional courses specifically relevant to administrative work are also offered, such as financial reporting, administering automated, self-service programs for course registration and evaluation, on usage of free internet tools in social-networking to build contacts with alumni and conduct e-marketing, etc.

The opportunity for further training through such courses, in my view, contributes importantly to the quality of higher education experience since higher education is an important stage in a lifelong trajectory of acquiring transferable competences. While we can (or should be able to) expect curricular activities to also develop these competences, it is through the courses described above that students can develop these competences at an even higher level. We should thus find ways to create incentives for higher education institutions to make an enhanced effort in this area.

\textbf{Key recommendations:}

- To raise awareness of the importance of excellent teaching in higher education and to develop mechanisms for the identification, development, and dissemination of good

individual and institutional practice in learning and teaching I recommend setting up a national centre or institute for excellence in teaching and learning – either under the auspices of the AQQ or as an independent institution. Such a centre would offer mechanisms for collaboration and benchmarking with the objective of supporting strategic change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching, including curriculum development and assessment. Among its initiatives it could include grants for promoting scholarship and research on learning and teaching as well as awards for distinction in excellence of teaching and learning.

- Strategic infrastructural investments have to be made into the maintenance and upgrading of information and communication technologies for their usage in all areas of higher education institutional operations. Areas of particular strategic importance include development of distance education programmes, ICT in teaching and learning, and continuous training of all user groups within the higher education community.

- Corporate-academic partnerships should be encouraged to form an increasing part of the institutions’ efforts when locating funding and controlling costs of full usage of advanced technologies.

- It is of paramount importance to expand national broadband network to ensure that every household in Slovenia, and thus every student in tertiary education, has high-speed internet connection.

- Create incentives for higher education institutions to design voluntary courses for students, academics and administrators for the development of transferable competences that are seen as ‘needed for personal fulfilment, social inclusion and employment in a knowledge society’. These courses should be designed to develop competences at a higher level and thus complement the efforts within curricular activities, and they should be tailored to the specific needs of different groups in the academic community.
**Internationalization of higher education**

Internationalisation is one of the areas in Slovenian higher education that calls for special attention and emphasis. Our higher education institutions are far from being truly internationalised: the numbers of foreign students, researchers and academics at our higher education institutions are far below the European average; the participation of Slovenian researchers in international research projects is slight; our students (and academics) are still largely poorly prepared for academic writing in English and thus for presenting their work to the global academic community. Yet, the world around us is becoming inescapably international. If we consider internationalisation as critical for improving the quality of higher education - and not simply as an end in itself- then this area needs to feature prominently in the higher educational priorities for the future. The argument for this is well known: international experience helps students develop key competences for living and working in a world of increasingly interconnected markets and societies. The internationalisation of Slovenian higher education has to move beyond the outward mobility of Slovenian students, researchers and university staff – this aspect remains important, and has to be supported by all mean, but it is not sufficient. It is unrealistic to think that outward mobility will in the near future include a majority of Slovenian student population, especially as the student body increasingly includes mature students.

**The “international classroom”**

Therefore, if we are to achieve the goal of equipping students with international and intercultural competences we have to create an “international classroom” at home institutions, like this has been done by some other smaller EU countries, most notably the Netherlands and the Nordic countries. To do this will require a considerable investment of time, effort and finance; there are unlikely to be any significant short-term successes; and political good-will is going to be necessary to tackle some of the sensitive questions that were on the agenda already in the past, like language policy.

The key mechanisms to achieve this lie firstly in **incorporating an international dimension in what is being taught** – as part of modernising the curricula (and in connection with establishing the National Qualifications Framework). This, of course, does not mean only translating particular courses in a programme (not necessarily every course) into English (or another international language). It means critically re-examining the content, and teaching
international and intercultural competences and how to make an explicit connection between what is being taught and the lives of students outside the classroom in the world we live in.

Secondly, **attracting foreign students, researchers and academics** for short or longer term study and work in Slovenia is an integral part of this goal. A related concern is **securing housing** for foreign students and researchers. Another important area to consider is “relaxing” **the existing constitutional requirement regarding education provision in Slovenian**; at least to enable postgraduate courses and programs in English. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieve the “international classroom” at home. The key challenge here is securing the ability of lecturers and domestic students to use English as the language of instruction. Also, the broader academic community, especially support services and administration, has to be able to manage catering for foreign students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Thirdly, it is essential to support **continuous and high-quality language training** for tertiary level students with the aim of making them proficient in academic writing and speaking in their respective discipline. The foreign language proficiency has to extend also to the administrative staff, and tailored language training needs to be made available to them also.

**International strategic partnerships**

To achieve an international character of higher education institutions it is essential that such institutions have international links on all levels of functional and organisational architecture. Individual students, researchers and academics as well as institutions should obtain **membership in international academic and professional associations**. International academic and professional associations provide useful platforms for networking in view of establishing more lasting and deeper forms of cooperation. It is essential that decisions on international cooperation are “bottom-up”, i.e. driven by academics on the basic of academic relevance. Higher education institutions should consider also forging **long-term formal strategic partnerships** with one or more institutions abroad. Such forms of cooperation indeed require higher investment of resources and involve risks, but are at the same time the most efficient way of pursuing several objectives of internationalisation at the same time; such as, research collaboration and joint bids to European funding bodies; academic collaboration in advancement of teaching and learning, academic and student exchanges; joint
ventures in educational provision; and benchmarking in various other institutional aspects, e.g. support services and administration.

Key recommendations:

- Continuous efforts to promote and support outward mobility of Slovenian students, researchers, and academics.

- Curricular reform to include international and intercultural competences.

- Improved conditions for attracting foreign students, researchers and academics to study and work in Slovenia: information and support offered to international offices at HEIs in areas of promotion, legal aspects, applying for external funding; resolving housing problem; provision of courses and programmes (at least) at postgraduate level in English; funds to supplement salaries or housing for highly-qualified foreign researchers and lecturers (the existing provisions on maximum grants should be reconsidered).

- Continuous and high-quality language training for tertiary students to be proficient in academic writing in their discipline. Language training has to be offered also to researchers, academic and administrative staff so as to integrate internationalisations process into all spheres of higher education activity.

- Incentives for higher education institutions’ membership in international academic and professional associations and forging strategic relationships.

A broader vision of higher education

In my vision of Slovenian higher education higher education institutions are increasingly aware of the needs of the societies they serve and innovative in looking for ways to meet these needs – in teaching, research and other “public services”. Higher education institutions are eager to develop cooperative alliances in local, regional and national contexts with other societal actors: businesses, development agencies, employment agencies, local governments, and vocational training. They also have close links with primary and secondary schools for
purposes of recruitment and broader information campaigns about the meaning of knowledge in everyday life. A number of research publications (in particularly those by OECD in context of “learning regions” and “learning cities”) have presented strong evidence of the importance of education institutions for economic performance of cities and regions where they are located. While our cities and regions and their populations are caught in the complex interactions between global and local processes, higher education institutions can help shape the future trajectories of social and economic developments of their immediate surroundings by connecting global knowledge with the local.

While highlighting the objectives of stronger links between higher education institutions and the economy, we have to also ensure that the core values of European higher education – especially that of autonomy of higher education institutions and academic freedom - continue to be preserved. Research universities especially are in present times of globalisation and economic recession expected to transfer to the economy applicable knowledge and competent personnel. While cooperation with industry certainly can bring advantages to both sides and should be encouraged, it is wrong to believe that they will be sole drivers of economic progress, but rather only one - albeit important - actor in the knowledge economy. In addition, the importance of arts and humanities, which define our civilisation and culture, and social sciences, which contribute to our understanding of societies we live in and people we are, is as high as ever if not even gaining on importance in time of globalisation. In fact, it is my hope (and hope only) that time will come when Slovenian higher education institutions too will embrace some notions of liberal education; I would wish to see every student regardless of his/her chosen discipline have opportunity to deliberate on topics basic to our civilisation, and reflect on the notion that we all are products of cultural, ideational and value traditions and active members in shaping these traditions.

Furthermore, we have to ensure that higher education institutions and their academics remain freethinking – that is that they choose freely what their contributions to knowledge and society at large will be. It is only if such freedom is preserved that we can hope for unpredictable originality of knowledge to happen. In her inaugural address as President of Harvard, Drew Faust said: “The essence of a university is that it is uniquely accountable to the past and to the future—not simply or even primarily to the present. A university is not about results in the next quarter; it is not even about who a student has become by graduation. It is about learning that molds a lifetime, learning that transmits the heritage of millennia,
Higher education institutions should carefully guard academic space as - per definition - free of ideological choices and built on freedom of inquiry and search for “truth” based on dialogue and rigorous scientific research. This space and continue to provide a forum for critical and intellectually honest discussion about even the most contentious and emotionally-charged issues in our societies.

Finally, as we set Slovenian higher education sector to consolidate developments in areas such as lifelong learning and social inclusion, distance education, high-level research, knowledge transfer and supporting local and regional social and economic development, we have to stress that we should not expect all higher education institutions to sustain all of these activities. We should indeed acknowledge and celebrate diversity among higher education institutions encouraging them to focus their resources in areas of comparative advantage. In other words, our higher education system will - given its smallness and financial restraints – have to expand its activities in ways that encompass diversity of missions and correspondingly diversified structures. Perhaps funding incentives by the government should be formulated in the way that will allow and in fact encourage higher education institutions to choose their missions based on existing strengths and feasibility of strategic objectives. As this has become already evident in various countries in Europe, such differentiation can lead to enhanced and purposeful cooperation among higher education institutions (at home and abroad) with complementing missions. While higher education institutions will have different mission, unifying aspects should include full commitment to quality assurance, and especially quality of teaching and learning, and to internationalisation as one of the means of reaching quality.

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