professional services and possibilities for streamlining arising from the enlarged infrastructural stock. However, experience shows that economic gain should not be the primary driver for undertaking a merger process, if only because of the high transition and implementation costs. There are often long-lead times, when it comes to the implementation of mergers. Even when the processes have been completed, the real financial and institutional effects of the transformation may take some years to become fully apparent. Institutions involved in mergers often acknowledge that they underestimated how long it would take to mainstream procedural change (e.g., human resources and finance processes) and establish cultural change. Underestimating the duration of the transition period leads to allocating too little time and resources to complete all the work as envisaged in the plan, which also has a knock-on effect on the delivery of efficiencies and the overall success of the merger.

Elements for Successful Mergers

University leaders and managers, involved in merger processes, thus need to focus on sound pre-evaluation and costing but also need to ensure good planning and implementation as well as productive relationships with public authorities. They must also promote an inspired vision and leadership, fostering both trust among and the involvement of staff and the wider community.

Due to the basic characteristics of the funding system in many European countries, increasing staff and student numbers is seen as advantageous from a financial perspective.

The merger should be chiefly supported by a strong academic and business case, considering that mergers are lengthy, resource-consuming processes that are difficult to reverse. It is important to specify defined assessment criteria and apply these equally across the whole institution, to arrive at a balanced and comparable assessment of the wider situation.

A merger process may not be the best option for the institutions concerned—once an evaluation of the costs involved (both real and opportunity costs) and the potential benefits (both academic and financial) have been carried out. The university leadership and relevant stakeholders should consider other possible cooperation options, in order to ensure that the most suitable way forward is selected. The overall goal should be the development of balanced structures and adequate processes that facilitate, rather than disrupt or hinder, the academic mission of the institution. ■

Shifting Private-Public Patterns in Short-Cycle Higher Education Across Europe

Snejana Slantcheva-Durst

Snejana Slantcheva-Durst is associate professor of Higher Education at the University of Toledo, United States. E-mail: Snejana.Slantcheva-Durst@utoledo.edu. IHE *regularly publishes articles on private higher education from PROPHE, the Program for Research on Private Higher Education, headquartered at the University of Albany.*

Institutions for advanced education of a nonuniversity type—labeled tertiary short-cycle higher education—spread quickly throughout most of Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of rising demand for higher education, growing diversification of the student body, and the changing needs for high-skilled manpower of industrialized societies. The institutional diversity in short-cycle provision was tremendous—including tertiary higher schools, technological institutes, colleges, academies, tertiary professional centers, higher professional schools, vocational schools, and many others. By the 2000s, short-cycle programs served close to 18 percent of Europe's postsecondary students. Programs, focused primarily on professional training of short duration, of a terminal character, and opportunities for transfer to research universities, were limited to nonexistence. European short-cycle education developed both public and private sectors, with private initiatives often covering areas neglected by public universities, or in rising demand. By 2002, enrollments in the private short-cycle sector had grown to 1,246,480, almost half of all students (49%) in short-cycle programs across Europe.

Changing Size and Shape of the Short-Cycle

Prior to the 2003 Berlin Summit of the European ministers of higher education, short-cycle institutions and their programs were rarely considered an integral part of higher education systems. However, since 2003, and promoted by the Bologna process, a different and innovative kind of short-cycle higher education programs have been spreading throughout Europe. Unlike the predominantly terminal training short-cycle education programs of the past, the Bologna-driven short-cycle programs fulfill the dual role of preparing graduates for employment, while simultaneously equipping them with the skills and the opportunity to continue their studies toward a bachelor's degree. With this dual function, then, these innovative programs have the potential to serve as a bridge between the traditionally separated vocational and academic sectors and to create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education. These programs' dual function is also reflected in the place allotted to them in qualifications framework: as intermediate qualifications within the first (bachelor's) cycle in the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area and as Level 5 qualifications in the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

Today, most of the 28 European Union countries boast innovative short-cycle higher education qualifications. Among them, only a few had already integrated intermediate qualifications from as early as the 1960s and 1970s. Several of the remaining countries have either seriously redesigned their old short-cycle programs in order to integrate them into existing bachelor's degrees—as in Denmark, Hungary, Iceland, and Latvia—and/or have created completely new intermediate qualifications, as in the Netherlands, Belgium, Malta, and the United Kingdom. In 2012, the private sector held 42 percent of all short-cycle enrollment, significantly higher than the private sector's share of higher education overall. France, Poland, Portugal, Germany, Belgium, and Spain have especially high shares of private short-cycle higher education.

The private sector steadily declined between 2003 and 2012, and not only proportionally amid increased short-cycle enrollment overall, but even in absolute enrollment.

Private Decline

The redesign of the short-cycle higher education qualifications has strongly impacted private provision of intermediate qualifications. The private sector steadily declined between 2003 and 2012, and not only proportionally amid increased short-cycle enrollment overall, but even in absolute enrollment. In this period, the sector lost almost a quarter (23%) of its students. The largest drop occurred between 2003 and 2004—the years of redefinition of short-cycle higher education and its incorporation in the Bologna process—when the sector lost almost 27 percent of its student population. In contrast, public provision of short-cycle qualifications increased by close to 9 percent between 2003 and 2012, albeit with climbs and falls at different times. The combination of public gains and private losses has brought a significant shift in the intersectoral balance. Whereas in 2003, private outstripped public by two to one, by 2012 the sectors had become roughly equal in size.

Why the Private Decline?

Several reasons can account for the strong shrinking of private short-cycle higher education after the emergence of the intermediary qualifications in 2003–2004. First, the fact that the private decline began right after Bologna, at least suggests that Bologna was a key contributor. The new short-cycle programs demanded an alignment (direct or indirect) with bachelor's programs; and such alignments depend on successful interinstitutional and intrainstitutional partnerships. Such partnerships, especially ones that cross the private-public divide, are difficult to arrange. Europe's private higher education sector spreads mostly at the lower programmatic levels, with public institutions having a stronger hold on bachelor programs. As a result, one can speculate that public short-cycle higher education programs and institutions had an advantage in developing programmatic bridges.

Probing within the private sector, we discover that the fall was especially steep in the "government-dependent" private short-cycle higher education programs. Government-dependent means that more than half the funding comes from government. Ten countries offered such programs. Enrollment there, over a million in 2003, fell by a third by 2012. This drastic reduction involved both the discontinuation of these programs in total (as in the Netherlands) and/or their strong reduction (as in Latvia, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom). In stark contrast, student numbers in the "government-independent" short-cycle programs *increased* by 24 percent in the same period. However, even after this rise in the independent subsector and fall in the government-dependent subsector, the latter still remains far larger than the independent subsector. In 2012, only 182,285 students studied in government-independent programs, barely more than a 10th of all short-cycle higher education students in these countries, as compared to 655,868 students in government-dependent programs. Thus, the major percentage decline in the (large) government-dependent subsector far outweighed the major percentage increase in the (small) independent subsector—hence, the significant decline in the private short-cycle sector overall.

A larger conclusion from these developments points to the changing roles in the short-cycle arena. If one considers the sectoral spectrum as running from private government-independent to public, with the middle occupied by private government-dependent programs, the shrinking of the government-dependent sector with the simultaneous rise of public programs may be interpreted as public "substituting for" or "crowding out" government-dependent programs. These developments thus signal the sharpening of private-public distinctiveness in short-cycle provision across Europe. ■

Higher Education in Albania: The Never Ending Challenge

Blendi Kajsiu

Blendi Kajsiu is an independent researcher with a PhD from the University of Exeter, UK. E-mail: kajsiu@yahoo.com. This article appeared in a different format in Stepping Into a New Era, *edited by A. Glass (European Association for International Education, 2014* Conference Conversation Starter*).*

Since the collapse of communism in 1991, Albanian higher education has been torn between massification and a lack of adequate funding. During the last 10 years alone, the number of students enrolled in Albanian universities has almost tripled. Yet, Albanian governments did not match such rapid increase in the number of students with an equal increase in the higher education budget. As of today (2015), Albania remains one of the countries that spends the smallest proportion of its GDP, around 0.6 percent, on higher education. This means that while higher education has become more accessible to larger numbers, its quality has suffered dramatically.

During the past 25 years, the challenge of accommodating a growing demand for higher education in the context of limited financial resources has drawn three distinct responses by different Albanian governments. During the first decade of Albanian transition (early 1990s to early 2000s), the main objective was to open and increase the number of state-owned higher education institutions (HEIs). During the second decade, from 2005 until 2013, when the Democratic Party was in power, the main government strategy was to stimulate private HEIs that would accommodate the additional demand for higher education—which state institutions could not meet. Since 2013, when the Socialist Party returned to power, the new reform has aimed to merge the state and the private sectors, transforming all HEIs into not-for-profit institutions that will be partly financed by the state and partly through private means.

Expanding Public Higher Education, 1995–2005

Faced with a growing demand for higher education, Albanian governments initially responded by expanding the state-funded higher education sector. Existing HEIs outside the capital Tirana were transformed into universities. Between 1992 and 1998, six such universities were created. By 2005, state-funded universities had opened in all the major cities in Albania.

While these measures helped increase the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions, they also undermined the quality of higher education. The constant increase in student numbers in public universities, without a corresponding increase in state funding, resulted in a serious drop in quality of teaching and research. Faced with overcrowded classrooms, lecturers were burdened with too much teaching, which undermined their ability to carry out research. As a result of financial restrictions, many public universities started hiring and attracting cheaper faculty dedicated exclusively to teaching. In many cases, departments did not meet even the minimal standards required by law concerning student-faculty ratios or faculty qualifications.

Expanding the Private Sector, 2005–2013: The Market Will Save Us!

During the period 2005–2013, when the Democratic Party came to power, almost 50 new private HEIs were licensed and the number of students in the private sector increased 15 fold. The government limited itself to accrediting HEIs without attempting to rank or evaluate them. By 2014, Albania had one of the highest numbers of private HEIs per million inhabitants in Europe.

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From 2005 to 2013, the ruling Democratic Party turned a blind eye to the declining quality of higher education, both in the public and the private sectors. It constantly increased admission quotas in the public sector, without a corresponding increase in state funds, while licencing numerous new private universities. The government ignored major scandals in some of the most corrupt private HEIs, which were openly selling Albanian university degrees, including to citizens from neighboring countries such as