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University Education: the Challenges of 21st Century

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Abstract

The article discusses the prospects for the universities development in the modern knowledge society. The main objective of the research is to determine the conditions for the universities transformation from relatively close knowledge-generating structures to the full-fledged constituents of the civil society. To this end, various factors are examined that form the external environment of universities and impact the establishment of their internal context. The research is conducted with the use of comparative analysis method which allows revealing the common and specific features in the development trends of American, European, and Russian universities. The state and market are considered as significant elements of the external environment. It is shown that in the democratic post-industrial society the state traditionally playing a key role in universities development delegates a number of its functions in terms of university management to the civil societies. The substantiation is provided for the necessity to form the universities' strategy in the market environment as a means for enhancing their competitiveness. The author further shows how such factors as globalization, internationalization and demography change impact the implementation of both the challenging task of establishing world class universities and the objective to implement the principle of equal opportunities in the educational field. Eventually, a number of conditions are defined that will allow making universities and higher education as a whole not only part of innovative economy but also the foundation for sustainable and fair society.

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Keywords: universities, state, market, internationalization, demography, civil society, equal opportunities

1. Introduction

Nowadays the society's evolution is substantially determined by the quality of education. A special role in this respect is played by universities: their mission is to educate the decision-makers in all social spheres. However, a large number of universities in different countries are now experiencing a grave crisis. Academic and mass circles extensively discuss the issue on the universities' capability to play a fundamental role in the knowledge-based economy and social advancement. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the universities' capacities and external threats throughout the world.

The aim of the article is to define social-and-economic and cultural factors for the universities' development in the early 21st century. In view of the set objective, it was implied to conduct the comparative analysis of the universities'

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activity external conditions, issues and emerging prospects for the educational internationalization in the national (Russia) and global context.

As a result, the conclusion was made that universities will be able to ensure their leading position in the society on the condition that they become an active driving force of the social advancement.

2. Review of related research

Universities, state, market

In the second half of the 21st century it became clear that universities had to follow the social changes. The struggle for the global leadership aggravated after World War II distinctly revealed the enormous knowledge potential for its achievement. This led the foundation for the formation of “knowledge societies” in the advanced nations. In such a society’s economy the added value grows mainly due to the application of knowledge and innovation-based technologies. Consequently, the society’s requirements to universities as “knowledge producers” were subject to changes. Based on the Schultz and Becker concept of human capital assets, the society suppose that the more the universities produce highly-qualified graduates, the more the economy will benefit. However, prior to obtaining the benefit, heavy expenses are to be incurred. By no means all states are able to financially support the system of higher education. This is the economic aspect of the issue.

The social aspect of the universities’ activity (inherently tied with the economic one) is determined by the opportunities of social and personal advancement provided by the higher education. Hence, higher education is regarded as a crucial component in the implementation of concept of equal opportunities. The available in the society wide access to the education makes universities a considerable force of social development and, on the contrary, the lack of such access isolates part of the society or even makes them hostile towards university education.

In consideration of the universities prospects, cultural factors are also to be accounted for. The academic community and society as a whole should answer a number of questions: does a modern university fulfil any cultural mission? Should a university bring up? And – even more emphatically – is the education provided by the university a value or a commodity?

Z. Bauman in his book titled *Individualized society* provides quite definite answers to these questions. In his opinion, the time of great ideologies and cultural missions passed with the decline of “modernity” age. The today post-modernist society exhibits pluralism, tolerance, and discredit of absolute values, therefore, the mentorship is likely to be condemned here. Market relations penetrate the university environment as well, and the choice of strategy for the adaptation to this new reality is the issue for the universities’ survival (Bauman, 2001).

Alongside with the significant differences, the periods of “modernity” and “post-modernity” both have the same feature: they are based on the modernity concept. The European Enlightenment project regarded time as a fetish – one should keep pace with time and be con-temporary. The university in its classical understanding is based on the concept of tradition: the knowledge accumulation is an evolutionary process. Too rapid changes do not allow forming the tradition and thus undermine the backbone of a university in its classic view.

Nevertheless, the surrounding reality is rapidly changing. In this context universities should determine their strategy: whether to be on the “catching up” position or bring its structure in compliance with the new reality.

In order to estimate the universities’ capacities in the reality of the 21st century, it is necessary to assess those external factors that will mainly determine their development. Traditionally, a crucial element in the universities’ external environment has been the state with its regulatory and supervisory functions. In the late 21st century in the developed countries such functions were limited and transferred to the civil institutes, including universities themselves. Experts underline that the universities’ autonomy is one of the significant factors for their growing competitiveness and, vice versa, the eagerness of politicians to elaborate the reforms in detail leads to the universities’ passive stand (Ritzen, 2011).

Meanwhile, the early 21st century updated the task of establishing world class universities, which implied a fundamental state support. A world class university, as per the definition of D. Salmi, an expert in higher education from the World Bank, is a university that educates specialists highly demanded in the global labour market, conducts

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