

# CONTROL, FREEDOM AND TRUST: SEEKING FOR A HIGHER EDUCATION MODEL IN A POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRY

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## Abstract

*Higher education in Estonia as in all post-communist countries has undergone rapid changes during the last 20 years. Soviet-type centralised model was replaced during the 1990s with liberal and sometimes even chaotic self-organisation of the whole sector. From the beginning of the new century, through the use of both financial mechanisms and quality control procedures state regulation has been strengthened. During last years the new paradigm of trust has been frequently discussed, and some first steps taken to introduce this approach, for example the replacement of control-centred curricula accreditation with quality evaluation and institutional accreditation, aimed at supporting the development of university's strategic management and quality culture.*

*Analysis of the higher education paradigm change in the research is based on Hargreaves's Bigger, Tighter, Harder and Flatter model, which describes the large scale educational change taking place in the western world during recent decades. The article studies changes in the Estonian higher education sector and observes possible future developments originating from the EU and Estonian strategies.*

**Key words:** higher education, educational change, quality assurance.

## Introduction

Following the re-establishment of independence, Estonia, as did other Eastern Bloc states, faced complicated challenges. The Soviet economic and political systems, after decades of dominance, had to be replaced with new structures. What the 'new' way of life should be like had to be learned from Western Europe. What the fastest and most suitable course leading to the 'new' should be no one knew. Estonia and other post-socialist countries were facing the task of "identifying their way".

The choice Estonia made in the early 1990s was a remarkably liberal model of development. Hope was placed on people's initiative and the motivating impact of market forces. These were expected to generate the desired change within the economy and society. Ideologically, it stood for highlighting the values of freedom, private initiative and enterprise and market regulation, while categories such as equality, solidarity and common interest were pushed to the background. A Soviet-style focus on the state was rejected while Western experience and openness were valued. A limiting context for change was set by the huge economic recession in the early 1990s, followed by a weaker capacity of the state to intervene in the various spheres of life.

In the higher education sector this meant that state universities became independent actors in public law, similarly to many other institutions the universities in Estonia had to either sink or swim. Once the state had withdrawn from its role of owner and bearer of responsibility, stakeholders' astuteness and adaptability became essential. Universities inherited the immovable property from the state that they had been using with the right to operate it under market conditions. The Estonian Academy of Sciences was reformed in the mid-1990s in order to

increase the capacity of public universities and several research institutes, formerly within the Academy, were now merged with universities. Legislation permitted educational institutions within the private sector, including private universities.

When reviewing the past 20 years, one must admit that the model of pursuing minimal state intervention has had good results in quite a few spheres of life. Lithuanian researcher Zenonas Norkus remarks that it was not only the liberal model of development which was responsible for this but various other development factors as well. He states "...more committed neoliberal market reforms were only one causal factor why Estonia forged ahead of its immediate competitors on the Baltic way towards affluence. These factors can be divided into background conditions, advantages of location, less deformed economy during the Soviet era, legacy of capitalist economic culture ..." (Norkus, 2011, 30).

The following is an analysis of the changes in higher education in Estonia over two decades and an examination of the relationships between national regulations and the autonomy of educational institutions. Analysis of political documents and educational statistics as well as content analysis of the Estonian public universities development strategies have been used as a methods of the study, helping to outline development trends in Estonia and comparing those with the global changes in higher education paradigm. Hopefully an Estonian case, describing both gains and losses resulted from the rapid liberalization of the higher education sector, will serve as an interesting example to other transitional societies, passed a similar path during last two decades.

## Global Context

Under conditions of scant resources and immense liberty in the early 1990s both universities and individuals interested in pursuing educational policy took a keen interest in western experience in organising higher education. What they discovered were endeavours to apply business and market logic in the education sector, facilitated by the dominant new public management ideology. The aim was the achievement of a more effective education sector upholding economic development. Previous considerations viewing education as cornerstones of society were substituted by the desire to measure results and outcomes, to rank stakeholders involved. The globalising economy propelled the education sector "towards more unity, intellectual identification and standardisation instead of variety and respect to individuality", which are accompanied by "managing and controlling systems", often also called tools for quality assurance (Autio 2011, 110).

Hargreaves has thoroughly analysed change in the educational paradigm over the last thirty years in the Western world, according to whom changes may be described via the *Bigger-Tighter-Harder-Flatter* (BTHF) model. "Educational change and reform strategies and their accompanying research directions have become Bigger, Tighter, Harder and Flatter. These trends are evident in the grand designs of political reform strategies but also in the ways that professional communities /.../ have developed and done their work" (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, Hopkins, 2011, xii).

Hargreaves *et al* treats 'bigger' in the meaning that changes which included a few educational institutions have been replaced by sweeping reforms which affect the entire higher education system. In the higher education sector people also talk about the global market, competition and international cooperation where results are being presented in rank and league tables. Back are the curricula and standards written in fine detail, to which compliance is checked through a detailed assessment system. Administrative intervention is increasing, it is expressed through the implementation of new public management approach in higher education institutions and emphasis is laid on management and managers' roles in ensuring efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of higher education. In conclusion, the principles and logic

of business practices are being introduced into the education sector, education has become an (equivalent) part of the wider society.

'Tighter' in the model indicates attention drift from input onto output, from resources to results. This is exemplified not only by a keen interest in learning outcomes and outcome-based curricula, but also in assessment and financing of educational institutions on the basis of performance results in the higher education realm over the last few decades. Attitudes displayed by society and the state have become stricter and more demanding in terms of results.

'Harder' refers to implementation of an evidence-based approach in the education sector – evidence, analyses and research results substitute earlier experience and intuition. An essential method of raising certainty is the establishment of quality assurance in the education sector. Similarly to the business sector, responsibility for the development and performance of the internal quality assurance system is left with universities.

'Flatter' indicates a desire to reduce differences between fields of study and in students' performance, and to make the sector more homogeneous. Frequently the focus is on attempts to quantify all life skills through detailed descriptions of learning outcomes, and thus assess how well they have been achieved.

Hargreaves's and his colleagues' approach to such changes is critical, along with several other education analysts. Limitations of the BTHF model are, in his opinion, that learning and teaching become fragmented and grade-oriented (teaching to test, learning to test). Additionally, assessment scales used to measure students' performance frequently fail to match the actual objectives of knowledge-based society and education in the 21st century where creativity, innovation, flexibility, problem-solving skills and team work are positioned at the forefront. Those dimensions are difficult, if not impossible to measure in quantitative indicators (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, Hopkins 2011). He asserts that practices applied in manufacturing companies for the improvement of quality whereby data is collated from all stages of the process and thereafter performance is improved, may yield the desired outcome in education over a short period but in the longer term this may actually divert teaching and learning away from more complex, complicated tasks and actual dedication. A well-known Finnish education researcher Tero Autio also expresses scepticism regarding changes in the BTHF style. "There is an emerging widespread consensus among the most prominent educational scholars that the Bigger-Tighter-Harder-Flatter educational reform strategy is more than problematic amidst the challenges posed by the knowledge economy and society – and living in the globalized world in general" (Autio, 2011, 110).

Irrespective of criticism the BTHF approach has been thriving. The Bologna Declaration, signed by education ministers of European countries in 1999 is a fruit of this way of thinking, BTHF ideology is clearly recognisable. The overall aim of the Bologna process – creation of the European Higher Education Area – is indicative of a tendency of standardisation and unification, simultaneously being 'bigger' (covering education systems of all European countries) and 'tighter, harder and flatter' as it contains a universal credit point system, description of learning outcomes and application of outcome-based assessment methods, but also development of quality systems based on harmonised principles.

### **Estonia: Adapting to Wider Developments**

Three separate waves of change can be distinguished in higher education reform in Estonia in the last 20 years (Heidmets, Kangro, Ruus, Matulionis, Loogma, Zilinskaite, 2011). Key words of the first period (late 1980s to mid-1990s) were freedom and making decisions on one's own. The Soviet-style control-centred model ceased operating, earlier regulations gradually phased out, although often they were not even abided, new rules were still in the making. A contradictory legislative framework and weak control on behalf of the government

paved way for grassroots initiatives and the setting up of the private sector in higher education. When Estonia opened up to the world in the 1990s, a number of BTHF disciples and followers could be found in it. The Estonian version of BTHF stood for heavy decentralisation of decision making rights which resulted in many new, primarily private educational institutions. Weaker central control along with an explosive growth in the number of educational institutions highlighted issues of quality.

The second period (from mid-1990s onwards) featured a gradual “return of the state” into the education scene: a legislative framework was established, the institutional structure of the education sector was taking shape, the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council was set up. The government used financial levers and quality assurance mechanisms more persistently for moulding the education sector. From 1995 financing of higher education was to be based on the so-called state commission whereby the government agreed with an educational institution to fund a set number of student places on specific curricula. In addition, universities had the right to enrol students who covered their tuition fees themselves. This move resulted in two distinct groups of students in Estonia: learners in state commissioned student places who did not have to pay for their studies, and those in the so-called fee-paying places who did have to pay for their studies. Although this rather black-and-white model has been criticised for years it has yet to result in any change. In response to the growing number of educational institutions, the foundations of the national quality assurance system were laid in the late 1990s thus launching a curriculum accreditation process in higher education. From 1997 to 2007 about 1200 higher education curricula underwent accreditation, 76% of them were fully accredited, 21% were conditionally accredited and 3% were not accredited (Heidmets, 2008). The goal of accreditation was first and foremost to check how well curricula conformed to the standards imposed by the state, while assistance to the development of curricula was given a secondary role in the decree which regulated the accreditation process. External assessment of curricula (accreditation) was undertaken on a grand scale but had controversial impacts. While on the one hand the curriculum landscape in Estonia has actually benefitted from it, on the other, surveys have shown that the expected role of the accreditation process in terms of encouraging an internal culture of quality remained modest (Vilgats, 2009).

The third period which arguably commenced in the early years of 21<sup>st</sup> century was characterised by an increasing integration with the developing European education area. All-European principles in education were being developed (further advances in the Bologna process, quality assurance standards, guidelines, etc) and also implemented in Estonia. This was a period when new concepts and terminology entered Estonia, such as qualification framework and quality culture, learning outcomes and European credit points, Erasmus students and university rankings. The European 3+2 study system was adopted in Estonia in the 2002-2003 academic year, even before EU membership.

These developments are reflected in the changing number of students, division of students into fee-paying and non-fee paying (Figure 1), and in the dynamics of the number of institutions providing higher education (Figure 2). Decentralisation of the education system and implementation of market mechanisms encouraged a significant growth in the number of educational institutions and students initially; later on the situation clearly shows stabilisation.

### **The New Paradigm of Trust**

Estonian higher education swiftly adapted to the BTHF ideology dominant in the Western world, in a broader sense it rules education-related decisions to this date. Dissatisfaction with the current situation is, however, evident. Some areas show signs of a search for new solutions, different from the BTHF logic. An example of this could be implementation of a new external assessment model in Estonia in 2010-2012. The current (rather repressive) accreditation of

curricula is going to be substituted by a considerably softer and primarily feedback-focused quality assessment system, accompanied by institutional accreditation facilitating strategic management and a quality culture. Differences between the old and new external assessment systems are presented in Table 1. The changeover between systems was introduced in 2010-2011 with a so-called transitional assessment, where quality, resources and sustainability of curriculum groups of all educational institutions in Estonia were assessed. From January 2012 universities may offer studies in those curriculum groups only for which the government has granted them the right to teach.

The major difference between the new and old external assessment systems lies in a shift from control-centeredness towards more trust. The old system was markedly control-based, its results directly affected a curriculum's future as a failed curriculum was to be closed immediately. The new procedure has no such consequences, its orientation being essentially self-improvement and self-development. Transitional assessment bridged the gap between the two systems. Figuratively speaking, an institution which is given the right to teach after the transitional assessment, is trusted, it is free to open curricula, carry out studies and issue degrees without external control and direction.

**Table 1. Comparison of old and new external assessment systems in higher education in Estonia.**

1996-2010	2011 onwards
Accreditation of curricula.	Assessment of entire groups of curricula.
Curriculum's quality was assessed (accredited) after its registration and issuance of an education licence.	Expert analysis of the quality of a group of curricula is carried out before an education licence is issued. The government grants the right to deliver studies after expert analysis.
Students lack certainty whether they would be awarded nationally recognised diplomas after the studies or not	The right to deliver studies (education licence) grants diplomas national recognition.
Accreditation was mainly differentiated (corresponds to norms or not) – and brought about sanctions (closure of the curriculum if a negative decision was made).	Differentiated (normative) assessment takes place when the education licence is issued, the following institutional accreditation and quality assessment of groups of curricula is primarily formative.
Accreditation results were approved by the Minister of Education and Research.	Final decisions regarding institutional accreditation and quality assessment of groups of curricula are made by the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency.
Institutional accreditation was voluntary.	Institutional accreditation is compulsory for all higher education institutions.

Universities have also taken steps to enhance society's trust in their activities. A comparative survey of development plans of Estonian universities, carried out in autumn 2011, shows that educational institutions aim to "become more open to society". Universities declare they are keen to involve different interest groups in their activities and decision-making bodies to achieve better conformation to society's expectations and needs. Openness and inclusion imply: employer and alumnus participation in the work of curriculum boards, boards of governors obtain a more significant role, continued publication of university's performance indicators.

The new external assessment system in Estonia is a step towards more trust, while a new financing model of higher education, approved in February 2012 contains familiar elements of

control and centralisation. The new financing system literally establishes state monopoly on funding higher education in the Estonian language, legally, universities may not charge tuition fees from full time students studying in Estonian-language curricula. Delivery of studies may only use monies assigned as activity support by the state. Formally, universities are free to teach in all groups of curricula that they were granted the right to do so (universities are trusted), but in Estonian language curricula universities may only provide training within funding allocated by the state which results in universities becoming more restricted by decisions of the funding provider.

## Future Choices

Analysis of the current situation reveals an increasing tension between two ways of thinking. On the one hand, there is an ever-pervading treatment of educational institutions as “similar and equal“. According to this, a university, like any business entity, must be managed efficiently, university’s primary processes should be guided by clear and transparent regulations, outcomes of study activities must be described and measured. On the other hand there is the view which emphasises the unique nature of the education sector and stresses that the process of a person ‘becoming wise’ is, in principle, different from producing a trendy jacket or assembling a car. The first is represented by the BTHF ideology, however, followers of the latter stress the trust component and less data, analysis, and control. In their view ‘becoming wise’ cannot be quantified or subjected to standard procedures. Thus one should have faith in what the best professors, scientists and universities do and maintain this faith even when they are not the most proficient in wording their learning outcomes or quantifying their assessment principles.

Wavering and search between the two may be experienced on a wider scale as well. The European Union has set four strategic objectives in education and training for its member states together with reference levels (Education and Training 2020, 2009). Education is seen as a means for uniting Europe, therefore mobility of students and teachers is supported (creation of flexible learning opportunities and increasing transparency of learning results, allowing mobility between formal, non-formal and informal sectors of education, and studies in the education systems of the EU and other countries of the world). The second objective is the improvement of quality and efficiency of education and training, which enables the retention of Europe’s strong position in the global context. Quality of education is intended to improve through management of educational establishments and the development of quality systems. High quality is expected to be attained through efficient and sustainable use of public and private sector resources and evidence-based policy. The third objective aims at promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship which should create grounds for avoiding conflict in a multicultural society. The objective outlines that education should promote intercultural competences, democratic values and respect for fundamental rights and the environment.

It should be pointed out that the EU strategy document *Education and Training 2020* does not specifically refer to major changes in the BTHF thinking although there are some indications of it. The higher education policy arising from the BTHF principles continues in its aims towards the enhancement of higher education quality through the development of institutional heads, management and quality assurance systems. Improvement of the higher education system takes place via improvements in the quality of each university separately. Thus it may seem that on the one hand large systematic reforms (e.g. degree system, external quality assurance system) are now completed, on the other, the aim is to continue working out national qualification frameworks. While improving the transparency of education, this will in its turn allow better access to education and mobility between different education sectors and systems facilitated through a process of benchmarking-based reporting based on reference levels establish in the EU. Wider access to learning, introduction of developing social and

intercultural competences in the strategic framework of higher education shows the return to social foundations of education, i.e. a retreat from the BTHF ideology. The focus is on the socially cohesive knowledge-based society of the 21st century, dominated by linguistic competence, cultural understanding, respect for and toleration of differences, creativity, innovation, skills in learning, problem-solving and team work, and entrepreneurship, which draws people together more and reduces self-centeredness and individualism. This is a sign that the peak times of conservative modernism and the period of standardisation may have been passed in higher education.

Estonia in its competitiveness strategy *Eesti 2020* places increases in quality, volume and international competitiveness as key priorities in higher education policy (Eesti 2020). The strategy states that improvement of higher education quality will take place through the concentration of competences and allocation of work between universities through the mechanism of institutional accreditation. This will require universities to identify a “clear definition of their role in Estonian society and based on this, implementation of concrete activities” (Eesti 2020, 10) The important development of competitiveness, work-related and general competences is enhanced through the delivery of formal and further education and retraining programmes by the higher education institutions. The strategy also points out the need to pay more attention to key social competences, to develop creativity and entrepreneurship, which will enable better adjustment to working life. One could say that BTHF principles still dominate in the Estonian higher education policy and goal setting, while the grassroots initiative of the education sector, which produced a new draft of the education strategy of Estonia, contains clear principles of a trust-based paradigm (Eesti hariduse viis väljakutset, 2011).

The search for new approaches is evident in Estonia and globally, but the BTHF logic is deeply rooted even though its disadvantages are evident. BTHF-based higher education reform in Europe has aroused interest and attention outside Europe. For example Adelson in his report “*The Bologna Club: What U.S. Higher Education Can Learn from a Decade of European Reconstruction*” (2008) recommends application of some learner-centred activities enabling accountability, such as a qualification framework and diploma supplements in higher education in the USA. Critics’ voices are also strengthening, Strauss and Howe (1997) characterise the last decades as an era of individualism and egoism which is slowly eroding. Economic recession and the situation where not only companies and individuals go bankrupt but also entire states, creates a new context for educational changes. There is reason to believe that there will be a move from pure business principles towards taking into account essential features of the education sector. Small post-communist countries, with an experience of rapid changes of the last 20 years could see this as their chance of being innovation leaders and testers of solutions.

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