

Higher Education Systems. A Comparative Approach in Post-Pandemic Business Ecosystems

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to provide a generic, descriptive analysis to higher education systems, mainly within Europe, to better understand the ways these are structured in different countries, at the same time investigating the educational systems in other non-European countries that are highly acknowledged as important providers of higher education. The paper is based on desk research, mainly consisting in the study and analysis of official documents, laws, websites related to the higher education system, mainly focusing on aspects like the types of higher education programs offered, their duration time, the awarded titles/degrees and their associated credits. The analysis revealed how the higher education systems are structured in Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Romania, as European countries, and in the United States of America, South Korea, Japan, and Australia, outlining the need for a more unitary approach in the European educational systems. The carried-out research promotes the development of a platform as an important tool in aligning the European higher education systems to the same standards.*

Keyword: *Higher education system, Higher education institution, Europe*

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education, commonly referred to as tertiary education is a non-mandatory form of education, leading to, upon graduation, the award of an academic degree. Usually, most of the persons, after completing a secondary education follow a university degree, mostly in the form of bachelor and master programs, considering the requirements on the labor market, as well. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are important providers of higher education, being responsible for the knowledge students acquire, but also for the skills, abilities, and competences they develop during the university years. Even though their role is highly acknowledged for societies' development, HEIs are still facing many challenges, especially when it comes to proving their societal relevance (Perry, 2012), especially in a worldwide context challenged by demographic mobilities, sustainability-related issues etc. (Bob, Ghita and Saseanu, 2010; Petrescu, Bac and Zgura, 2011; Grosu and Constantin, 2013; Ghita, Gogonea and Saseanu, 2019; Grosu, 2024). According to Pinheiro et al. (2015), some of these challenges arise from the development of the knowledge-based economy, including, the high value put on knowledge transfer, from the rise of highly skilled persons, from shifts in economies, especially on the labor markets, from increasing demands of interest groups, from demographic changes (Saseanu and Petrescu, 2011, 2012; Grosu and Dinu, 2016), or considering what Kromydas (2017) outlines, even from increased social inequalities, especially in Western societies, from the mass model of higher education, or from the "focus on labor market driven policies in higher education which led to an ever growing competition transforming HEIs to an ordinary market-place, where attainment and degrees are seen as a currency that can be converted to a labor market value", and where the purpose of these institutions switched from one of human development to one of economic progress. In such a context, one of the main debates associated with HEIs in current times is related to the high costs some of them imply, to the access to education in case of some renowned, prestigious universities, to the quality of the educational act, and even to their relevance for societies, as according to Halabieh et al. (2022) some of the HEIs fail to meet not only students' needs, but also those of the employers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Switching from a practical perspective to a more academic, research-oriented one, higher education has been an important subject to research, a vast literature on the topic being available. Even the comparison

between different higher education systems in the world is a subject well approached in the literature (Manța et al., 2015; Cao et al., 2023). However, the present paper aims to provide a generic, descriptive analysis to higher education systems, primarily within Europe, to better understand the ways these are structured in different countries, as these are responsible for the education of our future leaders (Saseanu and Toma, 2019). However, the analysis also comprises other countries in the world, highly recognized as important providers of higher education, mainly included for comparison terms. By better acknowledging the higher education system in the most important providers of such education worldwide, important guidelines, or even best practices can be drawn from their experience. In what regards the higher education system in Europe, the Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK), countries highly recognized for the high quality of the educational act they provide, are included in the analysis. However, less developed countries, members of the European Union as well, were also part of the analysis to allow for a more comprehensive approach to the higher education system in Europe. In this respect, Romania was included in the analysis. The other countries outside Europe referred to in the paper are the United States of America (USA), South Korea, Japan, and Australia. The paper is based on desk research, mainly consisting in the study and analysis of official documents, laws, websites, all related to the higher educational system in the specific case of each analyzed country. In terms of the investigated aspects, the types of programs offered, their duration time, the awarded titles/degrees and their associated credits are just some examples.

In such a context, the present paper is structured in two main sections. The first outlines the information revealed by the analysis in the case of the European countries, while the second puts forward information specific to the higher education system in the other countries in the world included in the study. The paper ends with a series of final considerations.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

3.1. The Higher Education System in Finland

Finland's higher education system is represented by universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS), targeting the development of coherent pieces of research that can be implemented in the educational process, making education in Finland's universities based on the scientific research they carry out. Universities rely on the connection between research and teaching. Students at universities can opt for different levels of studies, namely: bachelor, with a duration of studies of 3 years, 180 credit points; master, with a duration of studies of 2 years, 120 credit points; continuing university education, which consists of licentiate degrees (predoctoral title), with the duration of studies of 2-3 years; or doctorate, with the duration of studies of 3 years. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016; Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.)

UAS are, usually, regional HEIs, that provide training through subjects in several sectors and emphasize the connection with the labor market. The titles they award are higher education degrees with a professional focus. The completion of a UAS title/diploma usually takes between 3.5 and 4.5 years. Usually, the study time for completing the title of bachelor in engineering is 4 years.

3.2. The Higher Education System in Denmark

In Denmark, HEIs are grouped into colleges, which offer the short and medium cycle of professionally oriented programmes and universities, which offer educational programs under all three cycles and the specializations can be in various fields such as engineering, education, veterinary sciences, agriculture, medicine, pharmacy, arts, or business studies. In terms of qualifications, college programs are professionally oriented higher education. Professional qualifications at the short cycle, 90-150 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), give access to bachelor programs, 180-270 ECTS. Professional qualifications at cycle 1 give access to master programmes or, under certain conditions, to a specific candidatus programme, 120-180 ECTS. The master's degree and the candidatus one lead to doctoral programs, 180 ECTS. (The Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2022; The Ministry of Higher Education and Science, The Ministry for Children, Education and Gender Equality and The Ministry of Culture, 2016)

The study programs are research-based, analytical, theoretical and provide a broad base and specialized knowledge. The research-based qualifications of cycle 1, 180-270 ECTS, are associated with the title

of bachelor; the programmes qualify for both occupational positions and studies leading to the title of candidatus. Long-cycle, 5-year research-based qualifications are associated with the title of candidatus, typically a bachelor's degree plus 2 years of study; these programmes qualify for both occupational and scientific work; each candidatus programme must include one or two major areas of study in the bachelor program, as well as the preparation of a thesis. The HEIs measure the study activities in ECTS credits; 60 ECTS correspond to one year of full-time study.

3.3. The Norwegian Higher Education System

Norway has been recognized several times as the “best country to live in” by the United Nations Human Development Report. “Education for all” is the fundamental principle in Norway and, with few exceptions, there are no tuition fees. The study scheme is based on bachelor, master and doctoral studies, together with the ECTS credit system, thus making it easy for students from Norwegian institutions to receive credit for their qualification in other countries. Furthermore, Norway offers a multitude of study programs that are globally recognized.

Higher education in Norway is provided by universities, specialised university institutions, university colleges and private HEIs. To promote cooperation between universities and university colleges on the field of specialization and market division, the Norwegian Higher Education Network was established. Education, with a similar content and structure of titles, is viewed fairly so as to offer students and staff the same opportunities, regardless of the educational institution. With the quality reform implemented in 2003–2004, when Norway adapted to the objectives of the Bologna process, the HEIs offer titles of: bachelor, with a duration of studies of 3 years, leading to the title of master (National University Colleges of Arts offer a bachelor's degree lasting 4 years); master, with a duration of studies of 2 years. At the same time, the Norwegian higher education system offers merged master level studies with a duration of 5 years, as well as professional titles lasting 4 to 6 years. All these lead to doctoral programs, with a duration of studies of 3 years.

3.4. The Swedish Higher Education System

In Sweden, the state is responsible for the higher education system. The Swedish Parliament and the Government decide which regulations are applied and how resources are allocated to higher education. The Ministry of Education and Science is assisted by various agencies, including the Swedish Council for Higher Education. (Swedish Council for Higher Education, n.d., 2007)

The legislation for a three-cycle structure of higher education is applied since July 2007 and now this is the only one used in the Swedish higher education. In 2015, the Swedish government decided on a National Qualifications Framework (SeQF), based on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). SeQF has 8 levels, which are in line with EQF levels. Higher education qualifications are from level 6 to 8. Sweden has a credit system (högskolepoäng) compatible with ECTS credits; a normal academic year of 40 weeks corresponds to 60 credits. There is no national classification system in Sweden. HEIs can determine which grading system will be used and no general grade is awarded for a degree. For example, Grade Point Average (GPA) and other classification systems are not used in Sweden. (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2007)

Higher education is provided by universities, university colleges, HEIs and independent programmes, which are entitled to award qualifications (Swedish Council for Higher Education, n.d.; Study in Sweden, n.d.). There are three categories of qualifications: general; fine arts, performing arts; and professional qualifications.

3.5. The German Higher Education System

In Germany, the providers of education recognized as HEIs, are: universities – “Universitäten” and equivalent institutions; Technical Universities - “Technische Hochschulen” / “Technische Universitäten”; “Pädagogische Hochschulen”; Theological colleges; UAS - “Fachhochschulen”; Art and music colleges; HEIs for the federal armed forces; HEIs offering dual studies – “Berufsakademie”; Continuing Professional Education Institutions – “Fachschulen” and “Fachakademien” in Berlin. According to the ISCED, education received from the institutions of continuing vocational education (“Fachschulen” and “Fachakademien”) is equal to the first level of higher education. (Studying in Germany, 2022)

The key distinguishing feature of German UAS is the inclusion in the study program of paid practical training – “Praxissemester”. Such trainings are carried out in the premises of private enterprises or public institutions/administrations to bring the student closer to the needs of the labor market. Teaching staff in Fachhochschulen, despite being academics, have a strong background on professional experience in the labor market, outside academia.

The bachelor’s degree is the first higher education qualification in Germany with a standard study duration of 6 semesters or 3 full academic years. The master’s degree is the second German higher education qualification, which involves completion of 2-4 semesters. In universities and equivalent institutions, as well as in Art and Music Colleges, this period is mostly 4 semesters. The PhD degree, which is the third higher education qualification, can be pursued at German universities and equivalent institutions in cooperation with non-university research institutes. It is remarkable that there is no standardized period for completing the doctoral studies, this being a more in-depth and individual specialization. German doctoral studies include independent research and the defense of the doctoral thesis - “Disputation”. (Studying in Germany, 2022)

3.6. The Higher Education System in the Netherlands

There are two important categories of higher education in the Netherlands: vocational higher education and university education. Starting with the academic year 2002-2003, the programs offered by academic universities and universities of vocational education are organized around bachelor, master, or postgraduate structures. A research-oriented bachelor program requires the completion of 180 credits (three years) and graduates earn the title of Bachelor of Arts, Science or Law (BA/BSc/LLB). A bachelor’s degree in a professional field requires the completion of 240 credit points (4 years), and graduates obtain the title in the graduate field (e.g., B.Eng.). (Nuffic, 2019)

The short-cycle higher education, lasting two years (120 ECTS credits), has been introduced since 2007 at the request of various sectors of the labor market and confers the title of Associate Degrees (AD). The study program is carried out within the title of HBO bachelor, which is oriented towards professional, technical training. A master program in an engineering field requires the completion of 120 credit points (2 years) and graduates obtain the title of Master of Science (MSc/MA). Master’s degrees may only be awarded for accredited courses. The third cycle of higher education leads to a PhD or a Professional Doctor of Engineering (PDEng). A PhD title is the highest academic qualification that can be awarded. The title awarded is “doctor”.

3.7. The Higher Education System in the United Kingdom (UK)

The UK higher education system is supported by several government departments, agencies and other organizations, which recommend to the government and other bodies the needs and aspirations of higher education and help to inform the successes, opportunities and benefits of higher education. Higher education is offered by universities, university colleges, and institutes. Universities include the oldest and some well-known institutions of higher education - Oxford, Cambridge. University colleges and institutes are usually smaller than universities and differ in the types of courses offered. Over time, the larger ones have programs similar to those offered by universities; some of the smaller ones specialize in one or more subjects of study. (El-Khawas et al., 2010)

Most, but not all, HEIs use credit-based systems in designing and managing curricula and qualifications standards. To achieve the specified learning outcomes in an academic year, 120 credits are required, which are equivalent to 60 ECTS credits. Study programs usually focus on a specific field, but there are also combined study programs involving two or possibly three specializations. Institutions have autonomy to design and develop their own study programs. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provides recommendations for topics explaining core competencies at title/diploma level in a range of disciplines, which are intended to assist those involved in designing, delivering, and reviewing the program. Improving the quality of relations between business and the higher education sector is a priority policy for the UK, which has called for universities to be at the heart of the economy, to promote development in the UK, and to improve graduate employability.

3.8. The Higher Education System in Romania

The Romanian higher education system includes 87 accredited HEIs, of which 53 are state institutions and 34 are private institutions. According to the law of national education no. 1/2011, a HEI authorized

to operate provisionally, according to the legal procedures in force, becomes part of the national higher education system only after accreditation.

Higher education in Romania includes bachelor, master and doctoral studies. According to the Law no. 288/2004 regarding the organization of university studies, upon completion of the bachelor's degree program (Level 6, cycle 1), graduates can obtain, depending on the study program followed, a bachelor's degree, an engineering diploma or an urbanist's diploma, corresponding to several credits between 180 and 240 ECTS/SECT. The diploma conferred after passing a master program (Level 7, cycle 2) and successfully defending the dissertation thesis is called a master's degree, respectively graduates obtain the master's degree in the followed field; the number of credits is between 60 and 120 ECTS/SECT. Only graduates with a master's degree or its equivalent can participate in doctoral studies (Level 8, cycle 3). These offer upon completion a doctoral degree, where the title of doctor appears, which is conferred by order of the Minister of Education. Usually, the duration of the doctoral program is 3 years. For the fields of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy the duration of the doctoral program is 4 years. (Government Decision no. 681/2011 regarding the approval of the Code of doctoral studies)

For professional bachelor and master programs, dual higher education can be organized. The workload for dual higher education is estimated in accordance with ECTS/SECT (The law of national education no. 1/2011). At the same line, the same law outlines that within HEIs, postgraduate programs can be organized, respectively: postdoctoral programs of advanced research, which end with the granting of a certificate of postdoctoral studies by the host institution; postgraduate programs of training and continuous professional development, where the organizing institution issues a certificate attesting professional skills specific to the program; postgraduate training programs finalized with a graduation certificate issued by the organizing institution.

4. OTHER REPRESENTATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN THE WORLD

4.1. The Higher Education System in the United States of America

The education system in the United States (US) is designed to teach life skills that will benefit graduates regardless of the career they choose after graduation, so students enrolled in colleges or universities will take a variety of courses to earn a degree. For many international students, 'courses outside their academic field of study' is a foreign concept, but US colleges and universities value liberal arts classes in subjects such as history, English literature and languages, mathematics, social sciences, and natural sciences. These courses are considered important foundations for critical thinking, logical thinking, and communication skills. (Shorelight, 2022)

In what concerns the university studies, there are two types of university degrees: associate and bachelor. Associate degrees correspond to 2-year programs awarded by technical and community colleges, which include Associate of Science and Associate of Applied Science. After completing an Associate's degree, students are qualified to work as technicians or can continue up to 4 years in an institution to obtain a bachelor's degree. The bachelor's degree is awarded after 4-5 years of study, by colleges or universities. In both cases, students focus on a main/specialization area. In addition to specialized courses, students take mandatory core courses or general education courses, which develop their critical thinking and communication skills. (Shorelight, 2022)

The most common titles in the US are BA (Bachelor of Arts), BS (Bachelor of Science), and BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts). The BA title focuses on majors in liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences, while the BS titles cover business, mathematics, science, engineering, health sciences, and other technological fields. BFA titles align with creative arts such as music or dance. Most undergraduate courses are worth between 3-5 credits. The number of credits per course varies depending on the hours of instruction each week. Depending on the field of study, most bachelor's degrees require 120-133 credits.

4.2. The Higher Education System in South Korea

The Ministry of Education is responsible for higher education in South Korea. The Ministry of Education formulates policies, supervises and administers institutions, exercises control over the requirements of teaching staff and over the academic requirements. Institutional accreditation in the higher education sector is the responsibility of the Korea Council for University Education (KCUE),

while programmatic accreditation is carried out by specialized authorities recognized by the ministry. The development of higher education in South Korea has been influenced since ancient times. During the reign of King So-Su-Rim in the kingdom of Goguryeo, Tae-Hak, the National University focused on the study of Confucianism, martial arts, and literature. In 551, Silla, one of the three kingdoms including Goguryeo, established Guk-Hak and cheirospsasm was taught. It was also initiated the vocational education and training, where astronomy and medicine were taught. (southkoreaeducation.info., 2022)

In South Korea, Junior Colleges and Industrial Universities offer 2–3-year post-secondary courses, and they focus on practical education. In what concerns the university studies, universities offer courses lasting 4-6 years. Courses in medicine, dentistry and oriental medicine last 6 years. Universities and colleges provide theoretical education necessary for the development of the nation and mankind. Technical universities play an important role in education and research activities, especially in cooperation with industry. (southkoreaeducation.info., 2022)

In what regards graduate studies, graduate schools focus on academic research as well as practice-oriented studies. Doctoral (PhD) programs have a minimum duration of 3 years. The combined master-doctoral programs are a recent development with a nominal duration of 4 years, and no entrance examination is required for admission to the doctoral component. (southkoreaeducation.info., 2022)

4.3. The Higher Education System in Japan

The Japanese higher education system is a very powerful tool for national politics and culture. The academic achievements of students studying in Japan are high and match international criteria and standards. The general policy, management and administration of higher education are under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Funding for universities, junior colleges, specialist colleges, graduate schools, and colleges of technology falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (Monbusho), which sets minimum standards for universities in terms of curriculum, facilities, qualification and number of teachers. Many institutions can exercise autonomy in many matters, but the Ministry of Education retains its primary influence on the growth and development of higher education in Japan. (japaneducation.info., 2022)

The Japanese have transformed their higher education system by adapting and acquiring useful and valuable information as well as technologies from different education systems. Japan's educational culture is established on the philosophy of Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism. During the XIX-XX centuries, three major reforms in the field of education were introduced in Japan, which contributed to the individual work of students, as well as to the originality, individuality and internationalization of education. Equality in education is one of Japan's modern educational norms. About 70% of students who complete high school go on to higher education, thus making Japan one of the most educated nations in the world. In vocational training colleges, the health field occupies the largest number of students, followed by the cultural and engineering fields. (japaneducation.info., 2022)

There are five types of HEIs In Japan, classified in national, local, public, and private (japaneducation.info., 2022):

- Universities (university studies) offer: bachelor programs (Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science or bachelor's degree), with a duration of up to 4 years (minimum 124 credits), except for the fields of medicine, dental medicine, pharmacy and veterinary medicine, which require 6 years of study; master programs, lasting 2 years, respectively 30 credits in the specialty of the field of study; and doctoral programs, lasting 3 years. The duration of studies for doctoral programs in the fields of medicine, veterinary medicine, dental medicine, and certain parts of pharmacy is 4 years.
- Junior Colleges offer educational programs with a professional focus and lead to the title of Associate Degree, with a duration of studies of 2-3 years, respectively 62-93 credits. Depending on the department, studies focus mainly on home economics, education, -nursing, humanities, and sociology.
- Specialized/vocational training colleges lasting 1 to 2 years provide vocational and technology-related education, as well as education to improve skills and knowledge necessary for life. These colleges mainly provide specialized training in a particular industry or career.
- Colleges of Technology offer courses in engineering, commercial transportation, and other related fields of study, lasting 5 years, minimum 167 credits. For the commercial maritime course, the duration of studies is 5.5 years.

- Postgraduate schools: Each postgraduate school offers 2 years of courses, leading to the title of master, followed by 3 years of study and research for the scientific title of doctor.

4.4. The Higher Education System in Australia

The Australian higher education system consists of approximately 170 higher education providers. They are registered by the National Regulatory Authority, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Australia has approximately 43 self-accredited universities and a much larger number of non-university institutes for vocational education. However, titles granted by both types of institution are considered equivalent. (Universities Australia, 2022)

Australia has a National Qualifications Framework (AQF), approved by the Australian government. This means that there is national and international recognition of every qualification and educational level represented. (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013)

Higher education in Australia is characterized by a high level of diversity and flexibility. The education policy is geared towards facilitating mobility between different types of education, for example: between post-secondary level 5 education and tertiary education.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present paper outlined a generic, descriptive analysis of higher education systems, primarily within Europe, to better understand the ways these are structured in different countries. The Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, countries highly recognized for the high quality of the educational act they provide, were analyzed. Contrastingly, Romania, a less developed country, member of the European Union as well, was also included in the analysis, mainly to allow for a more comprehensive approach to the higher education system in Europe. In the same line, other countries in the world, highly acknowledged for their remarkable higher education systems, such as the United States of America, South Korea, Japan, and Australia, were analyzed. By better acknowledging their higher educational system, important best practices can be drawn from their experience.

The paper was based on desk research, mainly consisting in the study and analysis of official documents, laws, websites, all related to the higher education system in the specific case of each analyzed country.

In terms of the investigated aspects, the focus was on the types of higher education programs offered, their duration time, the awarded titles/degrees and their associated credits, amid other aspects.

The analysis revealed how the higher education systems are structured in Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Romania, as European countries, and in the United States of America, South Korea, Japan, and Australia. Even though there are some similarities in approaching the higher education system, especially in European countries, many differences are still visible, outlining the need for a more coherent, akin approach in the higher education system. The alignment of HEIs to the same lines, standards in Europe should be a desideratum of European countries. This will also lead to the development of a stronger higher education system. In such a direction, at the same time considering Europe's efforts to become more digitalized, a platform can be developed to smoothen the alignment of all European higher education systems to the same standards.

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