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Higher Education Policy in Kosovo – Its Reform Chances and Challenges

Preface

In the twenty-first century, higher education has for the most part been seen by scholars and policymakers as the driving force behind democratic consolidation and economic prosperity. The good skills and knowledge formed through higher education are key factors in generating jobs and creating prosperity. In this sense, universities also play a central role in expanding political and social stability and promoting a democratic society. Furthermore, not only GDP but also student numbers, the level of human capital, university quality, capacity building and competitiveness, the so-called Global Education Index (GEI), are perceived as being some of the main indicators of wide-ranging development. Particularly in the post-conflict societies, higher education is a crucial component of social and political transformation, which can also lead to stable state institutions and peaceful conditions. As has been demonstrated in many cases, higher education helps to a considerable degree in providing competitive and qualitative employees to the marketplace. But the higher education system, the political situation and economic development are linked and interdependent. Basically the higher education institutions have three main and interrelated functions: the knowledge function, the marketplace function and the socio-political function. In the context of both globalisation and the transition of the university role, scientific research or the creation of knowledge and education in a broad sense lead toward a knowledge-based society and economy.

Considering these facts and the demographic preconditions, tertiary-level education is perceived in Kosovo as an opportunity and as a key factor in increasing human capital, which on the one hand could enable economic development and on the other hand could enforce the democratization of Kosovo society.

This research project seeks to understand how higher education functions in Kosovo, what the main challenges and obstacles are to making it more effective and effi-

cient, what the possibilities are to increase the quality of universities and studies and how higher education is related to human capital. The interrelation of higher education with human capital on one hand and economic and political development on the other makes this study interesting and useful also for higher education policymakers in Kosovo, in the region and beyond. Furthermore, based on a competent research team concentrated on a variety of subject areas such as higher education, human capital, democratization, economic growth, political and social implications and the labour market, this important research project explores the interrelations of these topic areas.

But the most important questions to be answered are what impact higher education has on human capital, how this affects economic growth and what influence these developments could have on the democratic process in Kosovo.

Research Method

The research project analyses relevant internal and external documents, reports and data to address the legal, policy-related and historical background of Kosovo higher education and its development. To provide more information about higher education and human capital, and to examine the impact of both dimensions on the democratization of Kosovo, the research will also analyse relevant studies, research papers and governmental and non-governmental reports and figures.

In addition, the research methodology includes some standardized interviews with higher education experts, such as lecturers, assistants, students, and project managers of the organization involved in the education system of Kosovo to assess the role and impact of higher education on the development of human capital. The following standardized questions were included in the interviews:

1. How do higher education and human capital relate to each other? What are the specificities of Kosovo in this matter?
2. How does higher education improve human capital and how could this influence economic development and the democratization of Kosovo society?
3. What opportunities do graduates from Kosovo universities and universities abroad have on the domestic labour market and what should be done to increase their employment rate?
4. Which factors are essential to advance higher education and increase human capital in qualitative and quantitative terms in Kosovo?
5. In which areas are human resources in Kosovo essential to lead to significant economic growth?

6. What impact do university qualifications have on employability and how do post-graduate qualifications impact the career tracks of individuals?

The answers to these questions help to identify some of the key challenges, priorities, relationships and influences of these dimensions in the respondents' opinion. Analysis and interpretation are done in accordance with our research intentions.

It should be mentioned, however, that during the research we were faced with serious problems: for instance, the basic data and development indicators on higher education are not available or in some cases not reliable. In addition, the interviews were often conducted beyond the standardized framework, and most of the interviewed students preferred to remain unnamed in this research.

Development of Higher Education in Kosovo

The Government of Kosovo has defined education as one of its crucial priorities in order to create a society based on knowledge, economic perspective and employment.¹ Responsible for the development, planning and policy implementation of the education system is the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), which was established in March 2002. The Law on Higher Education was promulgated on 12 May 2003.²

In the Republic of Kosovo, higher education is provided at universities, private institutions of higher education (Bartës Privat i Arsimit të Lartë), such as colleges, research institutes and high schools. There are two public universities, one based in Prishtina in Albanian and one in Serbian in Mitrovica, which at the moment is not integrated in the Kosovo education system but operates in a parallel system.

There is also only one accredited private university, the American University in Kosovo, which is in close partnership with the Rochester Institute of Technology in the United States of America. It was considered by the British Accreditation Council in 2009 as “a model of good practice for the delivery of undergraduate and taught post-graduate programmes.”³

The number of independent private higher education institutions, nowadays by government decision defined as colleges, is relatively high for the population and economic conditions of Kosovo. These have established the same profiles as the public

1 Kosovo Government Annual Report 2008. Available online at http://www.ks-gov.net/ZKM/repository/docs/ANNUAL_GOVERNMENT_REPORT_2008.pdf, p. 78f.

2 UNMIK Law, 2003/14.

3 American University in Kosovo-AUK History. Available online at <http://www.aukonline.org/> (access on 17.06.2009).

universities and to some extent also employ UP professors. These private “universities” are generally more profit- and business-oriented and indeed do not offer a serious qualitative education.

The higher education institutions in Kosovo have a painful history beginning with decades of communist regime, followed by a period of segregation and parallelism until the post-conflict transition period and attempts to reform universities in line with the Bologna Process. Thus, according to the Kosovo think-tank for policy research, the development of the higher education system in Kosovo followed a dramatic trajectory from emancipation in the seventies to rebellion in the eighties and resistance in the nineties.⁴

The higher education system in Kosovo generally is faced with two main problems, first the problems sustained after ten years of Milošević regime, when the University of Prishtina in Albanian operated informally and as a parallel education system. This decade of isolation and discrimination damaged the higher education system in Kosovo in several ways, particularly with regard to funding, academic and scientific development and in other structural ways, such as research activities, staff recruitment, publications, etc. As a consequence, young and competent lecturers, scholars and teaching assistants are missing.

The second serious problem is the enormous and almost uncontrolled growth of so-called private higher education providers since 2002 and 2003. There now are around 30 licensed private providers of higher education in Kosovo. According to a study conducted by the Kosovar Institute for Advanced Studies – GAP on private higher education in Kosovo, this number is very high compared to other countries in the region, and the private programmes’ delivery and quality of education are predominantly of poor standard. The latest figure of students registered in private higher education institutions is approximately 19,000.⁵

The establishment of private universities in recent years has become a matter of business and profit rather than a diversification of the education market that would lead to further development of the higher education system in Kosovo. Due to their poor quality and dubious organization some people claim ironically that passing exams and even graduating from private universities is included in the admission charges. It seems also that getting a formal degree and the diploma matters more to the students of private universities than acquiring skills and knowledge required in a free-market economy.

4 Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), *Governance and Competition in Higher Education*. Prishtina 2007, p. 5.

5 Institute for Advanced Studies (GAP), *A Review of Private Higher Education in Kosovo*. Policy Report. Prishtina 2008, p. 7.

In 2008, the Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) made the decision that the accreditation of private higher education institution be conducted by external experts and engaged the prominent British Accreditation Council (BAC) for that purpose. After the evaluation process and based on the BAC recommendation, the government decided that no private higher education institutions (except AUK) were allowed to register new students in the academic year 2008/09.⁶

In 2009 the University of Prishtina and all private higher education institutions (Bartës Privat i Arsimit të Lartë) went through the second accreditation process, and except AUK none of the private higher education institutions fulfilled the criteria for accreditation and licensing. They are not able to operate as universities but are regulated as colleges. Some departments of the University of Prishtina, such as Psychology, Ethnology and Pharmacy, are also not permitted to register new students in the academic year 2009/10.

Access to higher education requires a certain grade achievement in the nationally standardized examination at the end of the upper secondary level, the so-called Matura examination, as well as meeting some specific faculty or department criteria. At the University of Prishtina access is regulated by the numerus clausus principle. In addition, entry to a given field of study is granted to the highest-performing students who have applied for that programme. But the demographic situation (the median age is 25) is also a permanent challenge for the public universities (Prishtina and Mitrovica), where the number of new registered students is limited.

University of Prishtina

The University of Prishtina (UP) was established in the academic year 1969/70, although the accomplishments began some years earlier. The University of Prishtina consists of 17 faculties with around 2,000 employees, 1,600 of whom are teaching staff. In the academic year 2007/08 UP had a total of 28,318 students (part- and full-time). The higher education system in Kosovo, particularly the University of Prishtina, used to be inseparable from the political situation of the country and the region. Being a relatively young university, the University of Prishtina, like many other universities in the region, lacks a scientific and academic tradition. It faces problems of insufficient teaching methods, research funds and innovations. Nevertheless, since its foundation the University of Prishtina has played a crucial role in political, social, cultural, economic and administrative life. The university and its students were also a fo-

⁶ Kosova Accreditation Project Report 2008.

cal point of resistance to the Serbian regime and the most important promoter of Kosovo-Albanian unity and identity. The abolition of Kosovo's autonomy status by the Serbian regime, had a terrible effect on the higher education system.

From 1991 until 1999 the University of Prishtina was functioning in a parallel system outside the teaching and research infrastructure: academics, students and all university staff were removed from its premises. The teaching process was continued in private homes and was financed mainly by the Kosovar Diaspora.

Between 1989 and 1996 the number of students almost halved. By 1995 there were some 12,200 students.⁷ Subsequently the main objective of the university was first of all to survive, thus marginalising academic life, research and curriculum development. The university reopened in the academic year 1999/2000 and students returned to their institutions immediately after the end of the war. Infrastructural reconstruction was imperative at that time on account of the damage caused during the war.

The university was faced with organizing courses, attracting teaching staff, registering new students and many other fundamental challenges. In July and August 2001, the International Summer University began its work within the University of Prishtina. Every year more than 400 students participate in the Summer University, almost half of them international students. Its organisation, one of the largest in Europe, is a good example of internationalisation. The Law on Higher Education and also the Statute of the University of Prishtina are based on the Bologna Declaration and are in line with other European universities.⁸

University of Mitrovica

The Serbian academic staff and students of the University of Prishtina were relocated in 1999 and reactivated in Mitrovica in 2001, recognized by UNMIK as the University of Mitrovica. It functions with strong support from the Government of Serbia and has implemented curricula and the higher education system of Serbia. According to their website there are 10,264 students, 45 % thereof Kosovo Serbs, 30 % from Serbia and 25 % from Montenegro. The University of Mitrovica consists of 10 faculties, with 730 teaching and 320 non-academic staff.⁹ It is becoming a member of the European University Association and Erasmus Mundus and Tempus Programmes are in operation.

⁷ Ian Bache, Andrew Taylor, The politics of policy resistance: reconstructing higher education in Kosovo. In: *Journal of Public Policy* 23 (2003) 3, p. 288.

⁸ Edmond Beqiri, Reforming the study programs and curricula at the University of Prishtina from the perspective of the provisions of the Bologna Declaration. Bucharest: UNESCO-CEPES 2003.

⁹ University of Mitrovica official website: <http://pr.ac.rs/index.php/home/o-univerzitetu/univerzitet-danas> (access on 21.06.2009).

There is no cooperation or even contact between the two Kosovo universities. The most serious problem of the higher education system of Kosovo is its integration and consolidation into a single education system instead of its ethnic polarisation. Higher education in Kosovo is characterised by two parallel systems, with educational services provided separately for the main ethnic groups. Two different curricula with opposing or to some degree even conflicting political and cultural narratives reinforce two parallel and separate realities in Kosovo. In this context the politicisation of the universities is a main obstacle to their reintegration into a single higher education system.

Reform of the Higher Education System

Attempts towards reform at the higher education level began immediately after the University of Prishtina reopened in the summer semester of 1999, once the war had ended. In the post-war period until the establishment of MEST, the Kosovo higher education system was governed by UNMIK, respectively the Department of Education and Science. The main priority was re-establishing and stabilizing higher education in Kosovo, where significant results have been achieved. However, there are still many obstacles and hurdles to attempts to reform and develop Kosovo's higher education system.

In March 2000, the University of Prishtina established the Committee for Strategy and Reforms – later known as the Bologna Working Group – which should follow up on the implications of the Bologna Declaration on higher education. Starting from the academic year 2001/2002, the University of Prishtina has adopted the 3-5-8 system based on three study cycles, which comprises 3 years bachelor, 2 years master and 3 years PhD studies. ECTS implementation also began in that academic year. In accordance with the Bologna process the University of Prishtina has had the opportunity to recruit international staff from EU countries and has started to implement the reform based on the principles of the Bologna Declaration.¹⁰ Curricula comprise obligatory and elective subjects. Obligatory subjects provide students with the basic knowledge in a particular field. Elective subjects aim to offer students in-depth and specialized knowledge. UP is also one of the first universities in the region where the Bologna process was completely adopted. In accordance with the Bologna Process, UP decided in 2007 to establish a Quality Assurance Unit, which is responsible for assisting academic and administrative units in improving the quality of their services and continuously ensuring highest standards.

¹⁰ Beqiri, Reforming the study programs.