The Assessment of Students' Satisfaction in the South-Eastern European Countries: An Alternative Approach for Evaluating the Quality of Higher Education

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Abstract **–In this paper we assess the student satisfaction as an alternative approach for evaluating the quality of higher education. For this purpose we have carried out a survey on representative samples of students in two universities: "St. KlimentOhridski" (Macedonia) and "AleksanderXhuvani" (Albania). According to our empirical analysis, study programs generally meet the students' expectations and they are more satisfied with the obtained theoretical knowledge rather than the gathered practical skills. Furthermore, they are generally pessimistic or uncertain about their future labour market perspectives which can be considered as a reason for pronounced intention to continue education after graduation.**

Keywords **– Higher education, students' satisfaction, quality**

1. Introduction

The past two decades the South-Eastern European countries (SEECs) have gone through the process of transition that has affected every domain of the political, economic, and social life. The initial transitional recession has inter alia manifested salient effects on the labour market performance. Generally, the transitional reforms initially had negative effects on labour markets, which were manifested in declining participation rates and in persistent high unemployment. The experience in almost all transition countries, including SEECs shows that the creation of new jobs in the emerging private sector was not initially strong enough to absorb the mass of workers laid-off from the restructured state-owned firms. At the same time, the mismatch between the skill requirements of newly created jobs and effective skills owned by the workers has become a substantial problem. Consequently, the labour markets became less dynamic with a relatively stagnant unemployment pool leading to increases in unemployment and especially long-term unemployment. The initial 'transitional unemployment' differed in several aspects from other types of unemployment in that it was characterized by pronounced labour market segmentation, long average duration of unemployment and a low probability of exiting unemployment into employment.

In these circumstances the higher education in SEECs has faced a challenging task to become a generator of competitive and marketable skills in order to promote greater employability. During the two decades long period of transition we have witnessed a variety of changes in the sphere of the higher education aiming to improve its quality and harmonisation with the European higher education standards. These changes range from increase in the number of public and private higher education institutions to introduction of more innovative education practices. Additionally, in order to be responsive to the labour market needs, the reforms in the higher education systems have to be considered in the context of the entire education system including the elementary education, secondary education, vocational education and training (VET) etc. However, the effects of reforms are often dubious in the sense they do not take into account the effective labour market demand and do not provide the graduated students with applicable knowledge and skills.

Given the SEECs labour market conditions and the on-going reforms of the higher education systems, the aim of this paper is to assess the students' satisfaction as an alternative indicator for evaluating the quality of higher education. In this context, we are particularly interested in evaluating students' opinions with respect to a number of aspects such as: the fulfillment of their previous expectations, the quality of provided theoretical knowledge and practical skills by the universities, preparation for successful transfer from education to work, their future labour market prospects etc. For this purpose the paper is structured as follows. In the second section we review the main labour market characteristics of the SEECs. A critical elaboration of the higher education reforms in SEECs is given in the third section. In the fourth section we present the

main results from the empirical analysis of the students' satisfaction. Finally, in the last section we draw useful conclusions and propose policy recommendations in designing appropriate reforms of the higher education systems in SEECs.

2. Labour market characteristics

The initial transitional recession has inter alia manifested salient effects on the labour market performance. As in the case of the macroeconomic analysis, labour market outcomes can be assumed to be result of number of factors such as inherited conditions, the nature of policies and/or other independent factors. Generally, the transitional reforms initially had negative effects on labour markets, which were manifested in declining participation rates and in persistent high unemployment. Mickiewicz and Bell call this unemployment that arose as a response to the shock of systemic reforms 'transitional unemployment', which in several aspects differs from other types of unemployment [1].

According to Blanchard in the context of labour market performance, the process of transition has been mainly led by two driving forces: ownership restructuring and sectoral reallocation [2]. These processes respectively assume a large-scale transformation of state owned firms into privatised ones and, a reallocation of a substantial part of the labour force from the manufacturing and agricultural sectors towards the expanding service sector. The experience in almost all transition countries shows that the creation of new jobs in the emerging private sector was not initially strong enough to absorb the mass of workers laid-off from the restructured state-owned firms. At the same time, the mismatch between the skill requirements of newly created jobs and effective skills owned by the workers has become a substantial problem [3]. Consequently, the labour markets in early transition became less dynamic with a relatively stagnant unemployment pool leading to increases in unemployment and especially long-term unemployment [4].

The SEECs can be distinguished as a particular group of transition countries with respect to their labour market outcomes during transition. The labour market adjustment in SEECs immediately after the initial shock was similar to that observed in more advanced transition countries i.e. characterised by a sharp increase of unemployment. However, unemployment in SEECs in the second phase of transition has demonstrated considerably higher persistence, which deserves to be explored as a separate form of labour market adjustment. Most of the analysts of SEECs labour markets attribute their bad performance to various factors that can be observed in number of fields, such as political instability, high levels of corruption, obsolete infrastructure, insufficient institutional capacity, high payroll taxes, large shadow economy etc.[5, 6, 7, 8]. All these factors create an unfavourable macroeconomic climate and obstruct the further improvement of labour market performance.

The most valuable source of information regarding trends in the labour markets is Labour Force Survey (LFS). This survey is conducted according the methodology recommended by the International Labour Office (ILO) and the European Statistical Bureau (Eurostat). The goal of the LFS is to provide comparable data concerning the size and the structure of the active population according to international standards. However, due to the political instabilities in the region, the LFS conducted on regular basis in SEECs are introduced relatively later compared to more advanced transition countries (for example, the first LFS in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania were undertaken in 2006 and 2007 respectively).The dynamics of the unemployment rates in SEECs is presented on Figure 1.

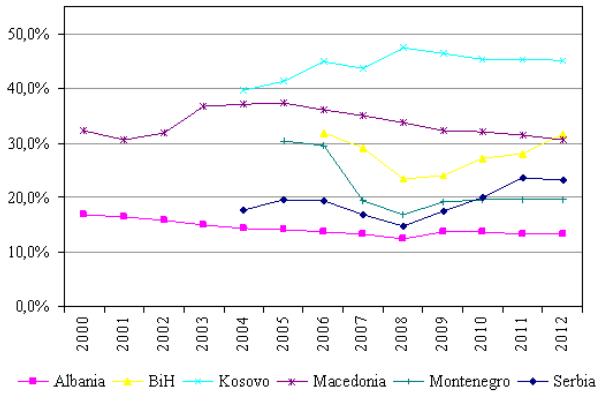

Figure 1.Unemployment rates in SEE countries

Having in mind the officially published data, we can generally distinguish several features of SEECs labour market presented as follows.

First, from Figure 1 we can observe that all SEECs struggle with high and sustained unemployment rates that characterise their depressed labour market conditions. Besides the problems in conducting the LFS due to the lack of experience and skills and other limitations related to the methodology we notice that the lowest unemployment rate is observed in Albania, whereas the highest is observed in Kosovo. Moreover, it is noticeable that changes of the unemployment rates in relative terms during the business cycle are rather small and do not vary as in more developed countries [9].

Second, the SEECs labour markets are affected by strong segmentation, meaning that certain social groups such as youths, less skilled workers, and women, face a higher risk of unemployment and

inactivity than the rest of the labour force. The low probability for exiting the unemployment status has been a reason for human capital erosion among the workers who were employed in the previous system but could not accommodate to the newly created ambience in the society. As a consequence, the high unemployment rates have enormous social implications such as rising poverty, income inequality and social exclusion of deprived social segments [10, 11].

Third, long-term unemployment prevails over the short-term unemployment implying likelihood of possible 'discouraged workers' phenomenon. For instance, long-term unemployment accounts for almost 80 percent of total unemployment [12]. Long-term unemployment has significantly contributed to an erosion of skills and motivation of unemployed workers, making them less employable over time [13, 14]. The deterioration of skills further reduces the attractiveness of the labour force and contributes to a blurring of the difference between the states of unemployment and inactivity. After remaining unemployed for a long period of time, a considerable part of unemployed workers stops looking for jobs and quits the labour force.

Fourth, the sectoral reallocation of labour has been characterized by a significant increase of subsistence agriculture and other non-standard forms of employment at the expense of rapid shrink of employment in industry. These trends in employment by sectors indicate that new jobs are not predominantly created in the more productive industries and service sector, but rather in agriculture and low productivity services. The increase in the share of employment in agriculture suggests that this sector has become a buffer for some people who have lost their jobs in the state-owned industrial enterprises [15, 16].

Finally, given the rigidities in the standard adjustment through employment and wages, less traditional (in the western context) labour market adjustment mechanisms may play a more significant role. Among the alternative labour market adjustment mechanisms in SEEC we particularly distinguish the non-participation, emigration and employment in the informal sector of the economy. These alternative labour market adjustment mechanisms play important role in absorbing a part of the unemployed workforce and providing additional income for the households.

3. Reforms in the higher education

Having in mind the depressed characteristics of the SEECs labour markets, the higher education has faced a challenging task to become a generator of competitive and marketable skills in order to promote greater employability. The important role of the higher education in the society has been widely acknowledged and continuous reforms have been undertaken in order to improve its quality. An effective higher education system has to provide students with necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills in order to ease their transfer from education to work. On the other hand, the insufficient demand for labour prevents the policymakers from getting relevant feedback of the reforms efficiency. During the two decades long period of transition in the SEECs we have witnessed a variety of changes in the sphere of the higher education. The main features of this transformation will be briefly explained as follows.

First, there is a proliferation of a number of new higher educational institutions and study programmes. Alongside this process, the existing universities have permanently diversifying their curricula by offering new and more competitive study programmes. The rising number of higher educational institutions and study programmes has contributed to increase of competition and creation of critical academic climate. As a consequence, the number of enrolled students in higher education in all SEECs demonstrates a rising trend. Having in mind that returns to education in the market economy is higher than in the previous socialist system due to liberalisation of wage system, it was reasonable to expect rising rates of enrolment in post-compulsory education during the transition process[17]. However, in the case of SEECs, we can argue that rising trends of enrolment in higher education might reflect depressed labour market conditions and poor employment prospects among young population. The numbers of public and private higher education institutions in SEECs is presented on Figure 2, whereas the number of enrolled students is presented on Figure 3.

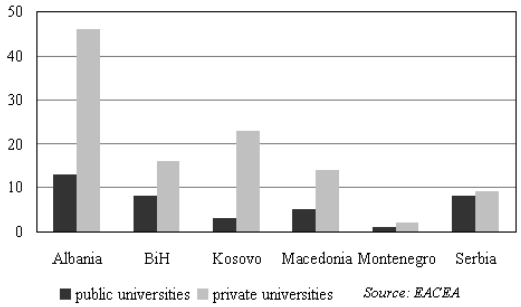

Figure 2.Number of public and private higher education institutions in SEECs

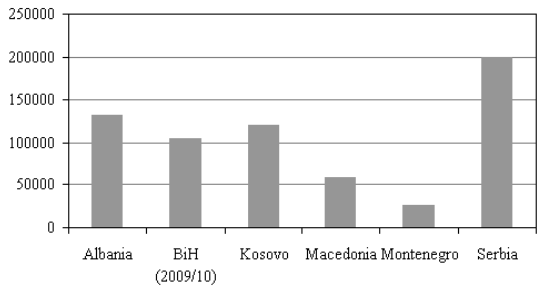

Figure 3.Number of enrolled students in SEECs (2012/2013)

Second, the composition of the graduated students in the higher education shows that most of the graduates come from the field of social sciences and humanities. The relative share of this category of graduates marks continuous increase in all SEECs. On the other hand, over the same period the relative shares of graduates in other fields of studies and particularly the natural, technical and technological sciences are continuously declining.

Third, the universities in SEECs have adopted the European credit transfer system and adhered to the Bologna process whose goal is 'to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education'. This trend has been crucial for the process of harmonization of the higher education systems in SEECs with the common European standards. However, the recent evaluation of the Bologna process shows a number of weaknesses that imply needs for further revisions and improvements.

Fourth, the adoption of the new legislation (for instance, the Law for higher education in Macedonia has been adopted in March 2008, whereas the corresponding law in Albania is adopted in May 2007. Up to the present, the Macedonian Law for Higher education has been modified ten times) in SEECs brought a number of novelties among which are: dispersed studies, clinical education, compulsory internship for all students and compulsory study programmes in English. Most of these reforms are dubious in their nature since they are not initially engendered from the academic milieu and are not widely supported by all members of the academic community. Moreover, these reforms have not been accompanied by appropriate analyses of the capacities and have been launched without providing the necessary technical and personnel logistics.

Fifth, in all SEECs have been already established internal and external quality assurance bodies or agencies, even though in some of them they are established only a few years ago. It is important to notice that in some of the SEECs still exist a number of weaknesses in creating essential tools for quality assurance. Likewise, in most of the universities is seen weak and inconsistent mechanism for providing a feedback and monitoring the institutions. In the same time, all SEECs have established national qualifications frameworks in order to create a uniform and transparent qualifications system which would cover the entire range of qualifications. Most of the SEECs, except Montenegro, have affiliate status at the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, while Serbia has the status of candidate member (Table 1).

Country	**ENQA status**		**QA body and agencies**
Albania	Affiliate status	2010	Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
BiH	Affiliate status	2010	Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance - Bosnia and Herzegovina
Kosovo	Affiliate status	2011	Kosovo Accreditation Agency
Macedonia	Affiliate status	2011	Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board
Montenegro	NA	NA	Council of Higher Education
Serbia	Candidate member	2011	Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assessment

Table 1.The quality assurance status of the SEECs

Finally, it is important to note that by 2012 there is no university from the SEECs which is ranked in the top 500 universities, nor by the Times Higher Education World University Rankings powered by Thomson Reuters, or by the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) conducted by researchers at the Centre for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

4. Empirical assessment of students' satisfaction

In order to assess the student's satisfaction from the education quality, we have undertaken assessment among students. The assessment was based on a

survey carried out on representative samples of students in two universities: “St. KlimentOhridski”, Macedonia (UKLO) and “AleksanderXhuvani”, Albania (UNAX). These universities are located in neighbouring regions and are involved in a number of cross-border cooperation programmes that promote the economic growth and European integration of both countries. In the university “St. KlimentOhridski” we have in total interviewed 578 students from six different faculties: Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Faculty of Administration and management information systems, Faculty of Law and Medical higher school. On the other side, in the university “AleksanderXhuvani” we have in total interviewed 350 students from four different faculties: Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Education Sciences, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Faculty of Human Sciences. The size and structure of the samples according to various relevant attributes are presented in Table 2.

	University “St. KlimentOhridski” (UKLO)	University “AleksanderXhuvani” (UNAX)
Sample size	578	350
Degree of studies		
Undergraduate	516 (89.27%)	295 (84.29%)
Postgraduate	62 (10.73%)	55 (15.71%)
Year of studies		
1	227 (39.27%)	67 (19.14%)
2	91 (15.74%)	64 (18.29%)
3	139 (24.05%)	164 (46.86%)
4	121 (20.93%)	55 (15.71%)
Gender		
Male	218 (37.72%)	123 (35.14%)
Female	360 (62.28%)	227 (64.86%)
Place of living		
Town	454 (78.55%)	259 (74.00%)
Village	124 (21.45%)	91 (26.00%)

Table 2. The size and structure of the samples according to various attributes

From Table 1 we can notice that although different in size, the structure of the samples is relatively close with respect to the major attributes such as: degree and year of studies, gender and place of living of the surveyed students. The methodology of analysis includes standard methods for statistical inference and cross tabulation analysis. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of the results is applied in order to draw useful conclusions and to shape policy recommendations in designing appropriate reforms of the higher education systems in SEECs.

In our empirical analysis we first focus on assessing to what extent students’ expectations are fulfilled in terms of the acquired knowledge during the studies. With this regard, we found that 81.3% of the respondents acknowledged that their expectations are met and only 5.3% said that expectations are not fulfilled. According to the survey results, we estimated that 13.4% of respondents had no opinion on this issue. Moreover, the distributions of answers show similar patterns for both Macedonian and Albanian students. The students’ expectations with respect to acquired knowledge during the studies are presented on Figure 4.

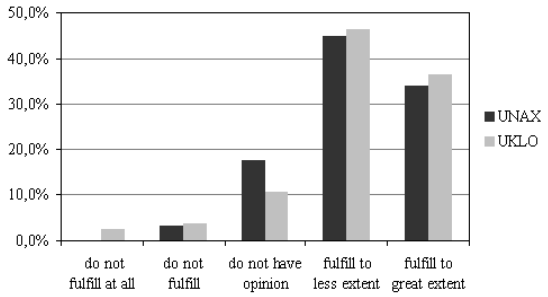

Figure 4.The students’ expectations with respect to acquired knowledge

We further estimate the students’ attitudes regarding the opportunities for acquiring theoretical knowledge and practical skills during their studies. In this context, 89.2% of surveyed students consider that their study programmes provide with satisfactory theoretical knowledge. Only 3.4% consider that during the studies they didn't acquired sufficient theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, about 56.5% of respondents stated that their study programs provide satisfactory level of practical skills. In contrast, about 28.5% of respondents stated that their study programmes do not provide practical skills, while 14.9% do not have an opinion on this issue. The students’ satisfaction from the provided theoretical knowledge is presented on Figure 5, whereas the satisfaction from the provided practical skills is depicted on Figure 6.

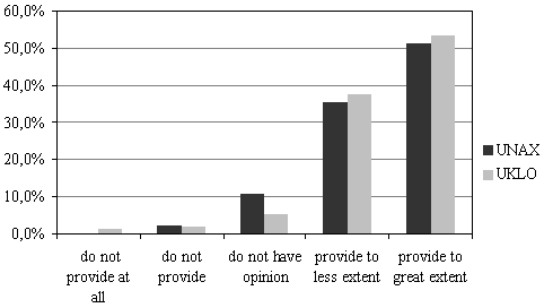

Figure 5.The students’ satisfaction from the provided theoretical knowledge

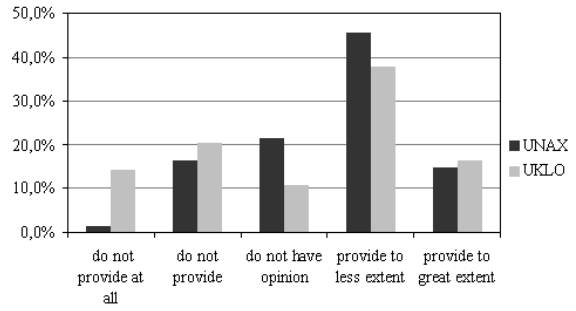

Figure 6.The students' satisfaction from the provided practical skills

Hence, our case study indicates that according to students' perceptions the higher education offers more theoretical knowledge than practical skills. However, this conclusion does not apply to all fields of studies since the students in the technical and natural sciences manifest greater level of appreciation of the practical skills compared to students in the social sciences and humanities. In this context, the test of independence between modalities for acquiring practical knowledge and the field of studies shows high level of statistical significance for $\alpha = 5\%$ ($\chi^2 = 172.41; df = 36; p < 0.0001$), which implies that we should reject the null hypothesis. On the other hand, we found that students who are satisfied from the obtained theoretical knowledge, are satisfied from the gained practical skills as well. In this context, the test of independence between the modalities of satisfaction from the theoretical knowledge and modalities of satisfaction from the practical skills shows high level of significance $\alpha = 5\%$, which means that we should reject the null hypothesis of independence ($\chi^2 = 130.63; df = 16; p < 0.0001$).

Regarding the expected labour market prospects after graduation, it is remarkable that 25.9% of respondents do not have opinion. Furthermore, the percentage of students without opinion from university "AleksanderXhuvani" is more than twice as higher as the percentage observed among students from university "St. KlimentOhridski". In contrast, the percentage of Macedonian students who see themselves as self-employed after graduation is considerably higher than corresponding percentage observed among Albanian students (21.9% and 5.1% respectively). Additionally, our findings show that almost 18% of the respondents perceive themselves as unemployed after graduation. In sum, the big shares of respondents who are uncertain with respect to their future labour market prospects reveal their pessimistic perception that mainly stems from the poor employment opportunities in domestic labour markets. The students' perceptions of their future labour market perspectives are graphically presented on Figure 7.

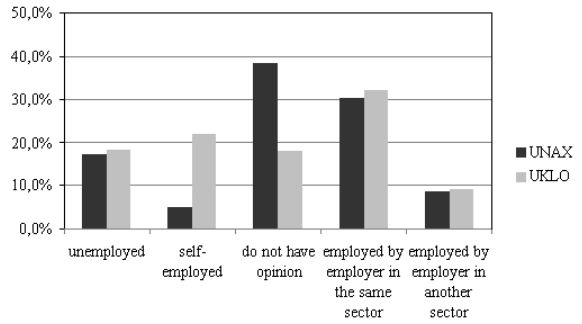

Figure 7.The students' perceptions of their future labour market perspectives

In our analysis we have also made an attempt to estimate the students' willingness to continue education after completion of their studies. The obtained results in both universities are close and show that almost 76.8% of the respondents have intention to continue their studies. This finding corresponds with the previous observation about the students' pessimistic perception of their future labour market perspectives. Namely, due to depressed characteristics manifested in low rates of job creation, the young population frequently resorts to extension of studies in post-compulsory education before entering labour market. The students' ambitions to continue education after completing the studies is shown on Figure 8.

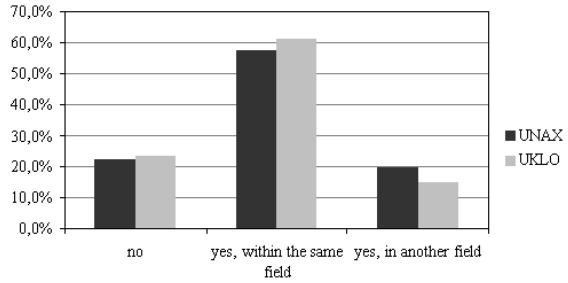

Figure 8.The students' ambitions to continue education after completing the studies

5. Conclusion

The quality of the higher education is a subject that continuously receives attention by academics and policy makers. The recent reforms of the higher education systems in the South-Eastern European region have emphasised the needs for evaluating their effectiveness. In this paper we make an attempt to build alternative approach, i.e. to evaluate the quality of higher education in SEECs by assessing the students' satisfaction. As a background analysis we first reviewed the labour market characteristics in the SEECs and concluded that they are characterised with

depressed conditions. This can be viewed in the high and sustained unemployment rates, the prevalence of long-term unemployment, pronounced labour market segmentation and increased importance of the alternative adjustment mechanisms such as: employment in the informal sector, emigration and inactivity.

In this circumstances it has been generally recognised that higher education play important role in improving the functioning of the labour markets by providing the students with the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Therefore, in the second part of our background analysis we reviewed the main features of the reforms in the higher education systems in SEECs. Generally, they are characterised with increasing number of higher education institutions as well as rising number of enrolled students particularly in the field of social sciences and humanities. Furthermore, there is a widespread implementation of the credit transfer system, adoption of new higher education legislation and establishment of systems for internal and external quality assurance. However, the quality of the higher education in SEECs as measured by international standards is still lagging behind higher education systems in more developed countries.

In our empirical analysis we have interviewed a sample of students from two universities: "St. KlimentOhridski" (Macedonia) and "AleksanderXhuvani" (Albania) in order to assess their satisfaction from the quality of the higher education. We found that generally the study programmes meet students' expectations and they are more satisfied with the obtained theoretical knowledge rather than the gathered practical skills. Furthermore, they are generally pessimistic or uncertain about their future labour market perspectives which can be considered as a reason for pronounced intention to continue education after graduation. As a consequence, we can conclude that there exists a wide room for further policy recommendations that will shape directions for future reforms in the SEECs higher education systems and will provide more balanced coordination between labour demand and supply.

Having in mind the previous findings we briefly formulate the main directions for policy interventions in the domain of higher education. First, the future reforms of the study programmes have to take into consideration the demand side of the labour market. In other words, a careful analysis of the labour market needs has to be undertaken prior to any implementation of new or amendment of the existing curricula. Additionally, important guidelines might be learned from the strategic documents for the economic development that identify the core competitive industries for each country. Second, the changes in the higher education have to be considered within a broader context of the entire education system and particularly the secondary education and VET. The improvement in these stages of education is necessary for achieving high quality of the higher education. Third, the higher education institutions need to establish minimum standards for enrolment in each cycle of studies. In this way, the selection process before start of the studies will enable easier upgrading of the teaching curricula and consequently will lead to improved quality of the higher education. Finally, the governments in SEECs have to consider the quality of higher education as top priority and intervene by rigorously implementing the quality standards at national levels. Hopefully, the increased government awareness will further increase the investment in higher education and will contribute for gradually convergence of the SEECs higher education systems toward the standards adopted in more developed countries.

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