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STEPS TOWARD THE QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN WESTERN BALKANS AND THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This paper is providing a comprehensive overview of the state of higher education in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on Quality and Quality Assurance, examining the challenges and opportunities faced by each country in the region, addressing issues, ranging from access to education and relevance of curricula, to coordination in quality assurance and alignment with European Standards. The analysis highlights common themes across the Western Balkans, such as the need for greater relevance of education to the labor market, improvements in coordination and collaboration between educational institutions and relevant agencies, and the imperative to address challenges in early childhood education and access to higher education.

Key words: quality in higher education, quality assurance

Introduction

The term quality assurance refers to “systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement” (OECD, 2005).

The growing demand for good quality in higher education institutions by students and society imply that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) recently face the similar pressure with business sector for few decades. This phenomenon has often become even more serious for HEI who lack the finance, infrastructure, human resources and have recognitions issues as well as facing stronger competitions from, local, distance and international education institutions (Shohib, 2018).

High-quality higher education provision has been one of the key aims of the Bologna Process since its start in 1999, and in 2020, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) confirmed their commitment to quality assurance (QA) and the implementation of the European quality assurance framework,

including the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance, aimed at cultivating comparable criteria and methodologies (Bologna Declaration, 1999), traces its origins to the inception of the Bologna Process, marked by the signing of the Bologna Declaration. This critical juncture, following the objectives outlined in the Sorbonne Declaration of 1999, signifies the substantive realization of strategic goals envisaged to advance a cohesive and standardized approach to quality assurance in higher education across European nations. The Bologna Declaration, ratified in 1999 at the University of Bologna, serves as the cornerstone for fostering systematic collaboration, aligning criteria, and establishing methodologies to enhance the quality and comparability of higher education systems within the European Higher Education Area.

As stipulated on the Agenda for sustainable development and quality education, by the Council of Europe, "Everyone should have the right to an education of quality in order to have better chances in life, such as employment opportunities and better health, and also to participate in political life" quality is a key driver impacting on and affecting HE, individuals and nations.

The transformation of our societies is underway, propelled by factors such as globalization, an aging population, the technological and digital upheaval driving a surge in automation and artificial intelligence utilization, the imperative shift towards a carbon-neutral economy and grappling with resource scarcity, all compounded by the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. These forces are collectively restructuring not only our daily lives but also the dynamics of our habitats and the landscape of employment.

1. Repercussions for higher education, and impact matters of quality and quality assurance – major trends shaping the global era

Over the past three decades, the development of quality assurance (QA) systems has become one of the most important aspects of higher education reform worldwide. In the mid-1980s, several countries around the world started to set up national QA agencies. This reform, which originated in North America, spread first to Latin America, then to Europe, and, more recently, to Asia and Africa (Varghese, 2016; Uvalić-Trumbić & Martin, 2021).

The forces of globalization, an ageing population, the ongoing technological and digital revolution marked by the growing prevalence of automation and artificial intelligence, the imperative shift towards a carbon-neutral economy, and the challenges posed by climate change, coupled with the transformative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, collectively mold our societies. These dynamics reshape not only how and where we live but also redefine the landscape of work. In light of these shifts, it becomes essential to explore their implications for higher education, specifically addressing the issues of quality and quality assurance.

Global educational participation is on the rise, propelled by demographic and economic growth as well as shifts in public policy. Simultaneously, our populations are undergoing changes and aging. As global mobility rises, dramatic shifts occur in the geography of the global talent pool. HE is a global enterprise, shaped by geo-political factors and other disruptive events. Its success (or failure) is integral to powerful indicator of the knowledge-producing and talent-attracting capacity of nations. Geopolitical tensions are underpinned by competition (and collaboration) in knowledge and science – which is the backbone of the economies of the 21st century. Industry 4.0 and 5.0 transforming work and the labor market. While most new jobs are in high-skilled global-facing sectors, there is an ongoing need for middle and lower skilled employment (Hazelkorn, 2023).

The current world population (World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision) of 7.6 billion is expected to reach 8.6 billion in 2030, 9.8 billion in 2050 and 11.2 billion in 2100, according to a new United Nations report being launched recently. With roughly 83 million people being added to the world's population every year, the upward trend in population size is expected to continue, even assuming that fertility levels will continue to decline.

1.1. Analysis on the implications on Quality Assurance

New types of institutions with different missions, programs and modes of study to provide for diverse learners and society. The emergence of new types of institutions with different missions, programs, and modes of study is a response to the evolving needs of diverse learners and society. This shift reflects a recognition that traditional educational models may not fully address the varied requirements of an increasingly diverse and dynamic global population. Here are some key aspects of these new institutions:

- a) **Mission Diversity:** The missions of these institutions go beyond the traditional focus on academic knowledge dissemination. They may include goals such as fostering innovation, addressing specific societal challenges, promoting social justice, or providing flexible pathways for lifelong learning.
- b) **Programmatic Flexibility:** New institutions are likely to offer a variety of programs that cater to a range of learner interests and career paths. This might involve interdisciplinary approaches, practical skills development, and real-world applications to better align education with the needs of both students and the workforce.
- c) **Modes of Study:** In response to the demand for flexible learning, these institutions may adopt innovative modes of study. This could involve online and blended learning, allowing students to access educational resources anytime and anywhere. The emphasis may be on providing an accessible and personalized learning experience.
- d) **Inclusivity:** Recognizing the diversity within society, these institutions are likely to prioritize inclusivity. This involves creating environments that welcome learners from different backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. Inclusivity goes beyond enrollment numbers to ensuring that educational content and methods are culturally sensitive and accessible to all.
- e) **Community Engagement:** New institutions may actively engage with their communities, forging partnerships with local industries, governments, and non-profit organizations. This collaboration can enhance the relevance of educational programs, address community needs, and provide students with practical, real-world experiences.
- f) **Lifelong Learning Focus:** As the nature of work evolves, institutions may adopt a lifelong learning perspective. This involves providing opportunities for individuals to upskill or reskill throughout their careers, acknowledging that learning is a continuous process rather than a one-time event.
- g) **Alternative Credentialing:** Beyond traditional degrees, these institutions may offer alternative credentialing options such as micro-credentials, digital badges, or industry-recognized certifications. This allows learners to demonstrate specific skills and competencies to potential employers.

In summary, the development of new types of educational institutions is a dynamic response to the changing needs of learners and society. By embracing mission diversity, programmatic flexibility, innovative modes of study, inclusivity, community engagement, a focus on lifelong learning, and alternative credentialing, these institutions aim to provide a more

tailored and responsive educational experience for a diverse and evolving world (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000).

1.2. Demand from younger & older learners

The demand from both younger and older learners highlights the need for educational models that cater to diverse stages and needs throughout life. Here are some key aspects:

- a) **Adaptation of Programs:** Educational programs should be designed with flexibility to meet the needs of both younger and older learners. For younger individuals, this may involve incorporating practical and active learning methods, while for older learners, there may be a need for opportunities for requalification or skill upgrading to enhance their careers.
- b) **Flexible Study Modes:** Offering various study options, such as online or evening programs, can be particularly appealing to older learners who may have work or family commitments. Additionally, for younger learners, it's important to provide a study model that aligns with their needs and learning styles.
- c) **Active and Practical Learning:** Younger learners often seek active and practical learning methods where they can apply their skills in real scenarios. Older learners may benefit from educational programs that allow them to leverage their experiences and develop new skills.
- d) **Individualized Learning:** Providing individualized educational paths, where students can choose their pace and follow their interests, is a great solution for learners of all ages. Each student has unique needs and learning styles, and individualized learning addresses this.
- e) **Resilience and Reskilling for Older Learners:** For older learners, the demand may be related to resilience and reskilling. Programs that focus on building new skills and competencies can facilitate a successful transition to different areas of the job market.

In summary, the demand from both younger and older learners emphasizes the necessity for educational institutions and programs that adapt to different stages and needs throughout the lifecycle.

1.3. Reskilling, upskilling and repurposing qualifications to overcome generational inequalities and disadvantages according to socio-economic, race, ethnicity, regional and digital-divide factors

Reskilling, upskilling, and repurposing qualifications play a crucial role in addressing generational inequalities and disadvantages influenced by socio-economic, race, ethnicity, regional, and digital-divide factors. Here's how these strategies contribute to overcoming such disparities:

- a) Reskilling for Economic Inclusion:
 - ✓ *Older Generations:* Older individuals, who may have been affected by changes in the job market, can benefit from reskilling programs. These initiatives provide them with the opportunity to acquire new skills aligned with the demands of evolving industries.
 - ✓ *Younger Generations:* For younger individuals facing economic challenges, reskilling ensures they are equipped with the latest skills, making them competitive in the job market and reducing the risk of economic disparities.
- b) Upskilling for Career Advancement:

- ✓ *Older Generations:* Upskilling programs enable older workers to enhance their existing skill sets, facilitating career advancement and mitigating age-related employment challenges.
- ✓ *Younger Generations:* Upskilling is equally important for younger generations to stay relevant in rapidly evolving industries, ensuring they have the skills required for career progression.
- c) Repurposing Qualifications for Inclusive Opportunities:
 - ✓ *Addressing Socio-economic Disparities:* Repurposing qualifications involves recognizing and valuing diverse educational and experiential backgrounds. This is essential for addressing socio-economic disparities, providing individuals from different economic backgrounds with equal opportunities for career growth.
 - ✓ *Mitigating Racial and Ethnic Inequalities:* By acknowledging and addressing the systemic barriers faced by individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, repurposing qualifications can contribute to creating a more inclusive job market.
- d) Geographical and Regional Considerations:
 - ✓ *Regional Disparities:* Reskilling and upskilling programs can be tailored to address specific regional needs. This helps in overcoming geographical disparities by ensuring that individuals in different areas have access to training that aligns with local industry requirements.
 - ✓ *Rural vs. Urban Disparities:* Addressing the divide between rural and urban areas involves designing programs that consider the unique challenges and opportunities in each setting, ensuring equitable access to education and employment opportunities.
- e) Digital Divide Mitigation:
 - ✓ *Access to Technology:* Recognizing the digital divide and providing training to bridge this gap is crucial. Reskilling and upskilling programs should incorporate digital literacy components, ensuring that individuals of all ages and backgrounds can participate in the digital economy.
 - ✓ *Tech-Centric Qualifications:* Repurposing qualifications to include technology-centric skills is essential in overcoming the disadvantages faced by those who may have been left behind in the digital era.

In conclusion, reskilling, upskilling, and repurposing qualifications are powerful tools in fostering inclusivity and addressing generational inequalities. Tailoring these initiatives to consider socio-economic, race, ethnicity, regional, and digital-divide factors is vital for creating a more equitable and diverse workforce.

1.4. Graduate outcomes/career opportunities are key indicators of value-for-money or exchange value in society and the labor market

Absolutely, graduate outcomes and career opportunities are crucial indicators of the value-for-money or exchange value of education in society and the labor market. According to the [Graduate employability in the top universities in the UK, ranked by employers 2023-24 \(Mosse, 2023\)](#), here's how:

- a) Employability and Economic Value:
 - ✓ The success of graduates in securing employment and building successful careers is a direct reflection of the value they gained from their education.

- ✓ High employability rates and well-established career paths demonstrate that the education provided has equipped individuals with the skills and knowledge valued by employers.
- b) Return on Investment (ROI):
 - ✓ For both individuals and society, education is an investment. The return on investment is measured by the career opportunities and earnings potential that graduates attain.
 - ✓ A positive correlation between the cost of education and the subsequent career success of graduates indicates a good value-for-money proposition.
- c) Alignment with Labor Market Needs:
 - ✓ If graduates are well-prepared for the demands of the labor market, it signifies that the education system is responsive to industry needs.
 - ✓ Programs that align with current and future job market trends provide students with relevant skills, enhancing their employability and contributing to the perceived value of their education.
- d) Job Placement and Graduates' Success Stories:
 - ✓ High rates of job placement and success stories of graduates making significant contributions in their respective fields contribute to the positive perception of the educational institution.
 - ✓ Such success stories serve as testimonials to the effectiveness of the education provided.
- e) Quality of Career Services:
 - ✓ The effectiveness of career services offered by educational institutions is a significant factor. Institutions that actively support students in career development, internships, and job placement enhance the overall value of the education they provide.
- f) Industry Partnerships and Internship Opportunities:
 - ✓ Collaborations between educational institutions and industry partners, as well as the availability of internships, signal a commitment to real-world applicability and the integration of practical experiences into academic learning.
 - ✓ These partnerships contribute to graduates having a smoother transition from education to the workforce.
- g) Long-Term Career Advancement:
 - ✓ Beyond initial job placement, the ability of graduates to advance in their careers over the long term is a key indicator of the sustained value of their education.
 - ✓ Continuous learning and career growth demonstrate that the education provided has equipped individuals with skills for adaptability in a dynamic job market.

In summary, graduate outcomes and career opportunities are not only important for individuals seeking to maximize the value of their education but are also crucial indicators for society evaluating the effectiveness of educational institutions in preparing a workforce that meets the needs of the labor market.

1.5 Innovative and coherent institutional approach to learning, teaching and assessment offering just-in-time anytime/anywhere: accessible, portable, relevant, alternative funding/tuition models

An innovative and coherent institutional approach to learning, teaching, and assessment that offers just-in-time, anytime/anywhere accessibility, portability, relevance, and alternative

funding/tuition models can significantly enhance the overall educational experience (Laundon, et al. 2023). Here's an exploration of the key elements:

- a) Just-in-Time, Anytime/Anywhere Accessibility:
 - ✓ *Online Learning Platforms*: Utilizing online platforms and technologies allows students to access learning materials and resources at their convenience, fostering flexibility in scheduling and pacing.
 - ✓ *Mobile Learning*: Mobile-friendly formats enable students to engage with educational content on various devices, supporting learning on the go.
- b) Accessibility and Inclusivity:
 - ✓ *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*: Designing courses and materials with UDL principles ensures accessibility for learners with diverse needs and abilities.
 - ✓ *Multimodal Content*: Providing content in various formats (text, audio, video) accommodates different learning preferences.
- c) Portability and Transferability:
 - ✓ *Credit Transfer Systems*: Establishing mechanisms for credit transfer between institutions facilitates educational mobility, allowing students to move seamlessly between programs or institutions.
 - ✓ *Stackable Credentials*: Creating stackable credentials enables learners to build qualifications incrementally, enhancing portability and adaptability.
- d) Relevance and Real-World Applications:
 - ✓ *Project-Based Learning*: Incorporating real-world projects into the curriculum enhances relevance and application of theoretical knowledge.
 - ✓ *Industry Partnerships*: Collaborating with industries ensures that educational content aligns with current industry needs, enhancing the practical value of education.
- e) Alternative Funding/Tuition Models:
 - ✓ *Income Share Agreements (ISAs)*: ISAs allow students to fund their education by committing to pay a percentage of their income after graduation, providing an alternative to traditional tuition models.
 - ✓ *Microfinance and Crowdfunding*: Exploring microfinance options or crowdfunding platforms can offer alternative funding sources for students.
- f) Coherent Learning Pathways:
 - ✓ *Learning Pathway Mapping*: Clearly defining learning pathways and progression routes helps students understand their educational journey and make informed decisions.
 - ✓ *Advising and Mentorship*: Implementing robust advising and mentorship programs supports students in navigating their educational paths and making strategic choices.
- g) Continuous Assessment and Feedback:
 - ✓ *Formative Assessment*: Incorporating ongoing formative assessments helps students track their progress and receive timely feedback for improvement.
 - ✓ *Adaptive Learning Platforms*: Using adaptive learning technologies tailors assessments to individual learner needs, promoting personalized learning experiences.
- h) Technology Integration:
 - ✓ *Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR)*: Integrating VR and AR technologies can provide immersive learning experiences, enhancing engagement and understanding.

- ✓ *Learning Analytics*: Leveraging data analytics tools helps institutions track student progress, identify challenges, and implement targeted interventions.
- i) **Experiential Learning Opportunities**:
 - ✓ *Internships and Co-op Programs*: Offering experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and cooperative education programs, connects students with real-world work experiences.
 - ✓ *Simulations and Case Studies*: Integrating simulations and case studies into the curriculum provides practical problem-solving experiences.
- j) **Continuous Curriculum Review**:
 - ✓ *Agile Curriculum Development*: Adopting agile methodologies for curriculum development allows institutions to respond quickly to industry changes and evolving skill demands.
 - ✓ *Industry Advisory Boards*: Engaging industry professionals in curriculum review ensures that educational programs remain relevant and aligned with current trends.

In conclusion, an institutional approach that embraces innovation, coherence, accessibility, and alternative funding models can transform the educational experience, making it more adaptable, relevant, and accessible for a diverse range of learners.

1.6. Concerns to think about

The future is already here. Yet, our model of educational provision has remained relatively unchanged as if it was still a system catering to a small elite. Radical thinking is required as to how we design, organize, deliver and assess higher education and its relationship to other forms of tertiary education and training. Integration of the global economy and labor market and internationalization of the educational enterprise changes the way we think about quality and QA

During the thirty-second session of its General Conference in October 2003, (Quality in education communique) UNESCO organized a **Ministerial Round-Table on the Quality of Education**, the communiqué of which states that ‘Quality Education requires us to redefine the parameters of education in such a way as to cover certain basic knowledge, values, competencies and behaviors that are specifically attuned to globalization but reflect the beauty and richness of our diversity expressed in different forms of belief, spirituality, culture, and language (Hazelkorn, 2018).

The imperative to regulate the educational marketplace emerges as a necessity to safeguard against fraudulent practices, ensuring the integrity of academic pursuits. Regulatory Measures that robust regulatory frameworks are essential to identify and counteract fraudulent activities, thereby preserving the credibility of the educational enterprise.

In navigating the intricate relationship between quality, higher education, and societal expectations, a comprehensive and adaptable approach to quality assurance becomes indispensable. Such an approach not only safeguards the interests of stakeholders but also contributes to the cultivation of a globally competitive and ethically robust educational landscape.

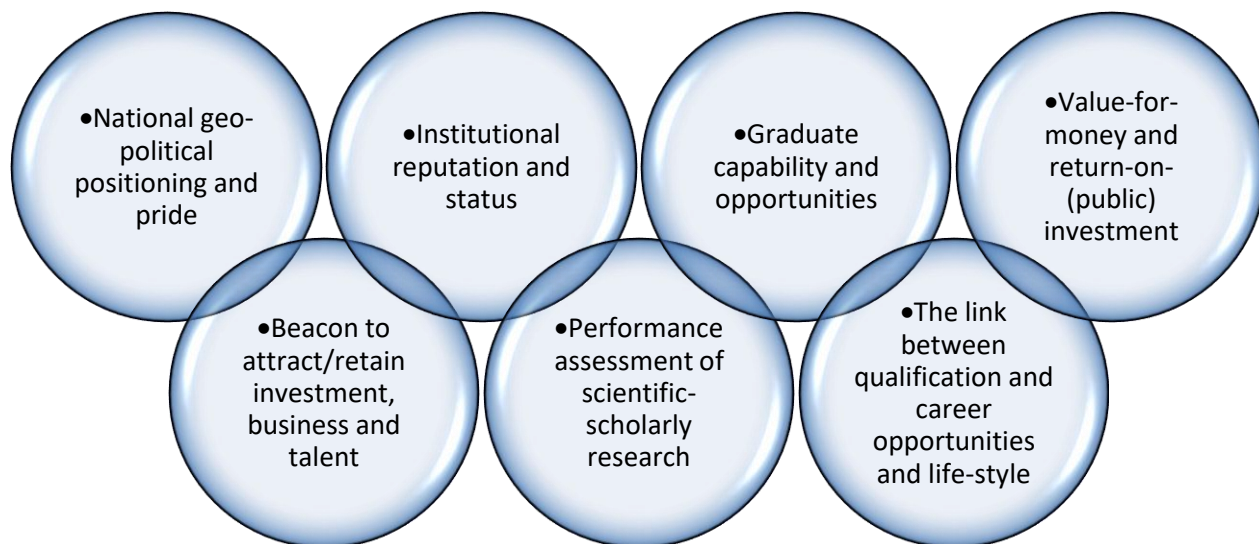


Figure 1. Quality is Concern for all Stakeholders

1.7. Challenges for Quality & Quality Assurance

Challenges for Quality & Quality Assurance is no longer “owned” only by HEIs or evaluators/accreditors. A growing number of employer-based & private alternatives – response to concerns about quality, grade inflation, skill competencies, etc.

Therefore, Quality & Quality Assurance of HE demands for:

International comparability and benchmarking – challenge of global rankings;

Greater responsiveness to societal/economic needs and regional accessibility;

Qualifications for mobile students, professionals and migrants;

QA which can respond to support new modes of provision, innovative program and assessment;

New technologies, MOOCs and new learning environments;

Teaching and learning: student learning environment, culture and quality of experience;

Graduate expectations: career, salary and lifestyle;

Employability of graduates: trends and competencies;

Fields of specialization/department: level of intensity, expertise, quality and competence;

Faculty quality: qualifications, expertise and track record, research, research capacity, quality of outcomes/impact & research team;

Doctoral education, research training/support and management of research;

Performance and compared benchmarked regionally, nationally & internationally;

Attraction capacity and internationalization;

Value-for-money, societal contribution for individuals, economy and society;

Efficiency level: how much output vis-a-vis funding; etc.

Lessons from Bologna placed quality. Within a broader educational framework the big idea was the “accountability loop”: ESG and QA systems set evaluation standards and guidelines for institutional self-assessment and quality processes, and external monitoring;

Quality is a shared responsibility: Agency, HEI and students/staff;

The qualification framework facilitates flexible learning paths and sets out a clear statement of what students must demonstrate at each qualification level;

Formalized concept of learning outcomes rather than measuring inputs (e.g., credit hours, classroom teaching, entry grades).

When we confront quality of governance and leadership challenges in HE it is of a great importance to ask the following questions: Is a quality culture and management of quality embedded holistically across the institution?; What are we doing to embed and enhance a quality culture across everything we do?; To what extent is quality a shared responsibility?; Do we have the appropriate resources and tools to address the challenges presented by academic integrity and academic misconduct?;

As of the Curriculum and Learning Outcomes, the reasonable questions on which we should give an answer include: Does the curriculum prepare graduates for the future/changing opportunities and to be global citizens who can have a positive impact locally/globally?; To what extent is educational provision underpinned by innovative pedagogies & modes of learning and assessment, with emphasis on multidisciplinary, challenge and practice-based learning?; etc.

2. Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Western Balkans Countries

The Western Balkans Economies are strongly committed to building the quality culture within the higher education systems. Accreditation processes are one of the ways the quality is ensured, measured and objectively analyzed. The Western Balkans economies have set up their accreditation procedures, however their alignment with the European Standards and Guidelines is yet to follow (Register of External Quality Assurance Results in the Western Balkans (QA Register)).

Quality assurance is a cornerstone of achieving excellence and high quality of education which is based on the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion as well as the fundamental values in higher education as understood in the Bologna Process (Napier, et al. 2022).

2.1. European higher education area and quality assurance system in WB countries

The political and geographical changes that took place in the region in the 1990s were very similar to a “wave” that involved all 8 Balkan countries profiled in this research. The development of the national education systems of the Western Balkan countries since the break-up of Yugoslavia has been impacted by war and ethnic conflict, by the process of nation-building, democratization and by European integration. These developments have been accompanied by a steep reduction in government funding and the partial disintegration of education systems following the war, integration into the Bologna process and the European higher education area, and by structural reforms in the public sector which affected education (Treska, 2017).

Albania has put into effect its pre-university education strategy and initiated the implementation of higher education laws. Despite these efforts, there is a pressing need to assess and enhance the quality of education, particularly due to the significant emigration of young, skilled individuals in the context of limited job opportunities. The results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) underscore this concern, revealing that Albania lags considerably behind the OECD and EU averages concerning the fundamental skills of 15-year-olds. Addressing these educational challenges is critical for retaining skilled talent within the country and improving overall academic proficiency.

In September 2015, the Albanian Parliament had introduced amendments to the Law on Higher Education. The overarching objective was to align the Albanian education system with the Western European model. The educational framework is predominantly unitary, encompassing all levels of education delivered by both public and private institutions and faculties. However, it's worth noting that a precise assessment of progress in this regard is challenging due to irregular updates in data differentiating between private and public institutions across all education levels.

Kosovo attempts to address the evident skills mismatch in the labor market have so far not been effective in producing results. The implementation of the adopted 2016-2020 strategy for quality assurance in pre-university education in Kosovo will depend on stable and adequate financial and committed human resources. Some 40 % of graduates with a vocational diploma and 35 % of graduates with a university degree do not have the necessary skills demanded by the labor market. Vocational education and training programs are poorly coordinated, lack appropriate strategies and priorities, and do not reinforce Kosovo's economic development strategies. The government needs to ensure the implementation of the quality assurance strategy and establish quality assurance mechanisms at the municipal level. The Accreditation Agency for Higher Education has revised its criteria, taking into account EU standards. This resulted in the reduction in the number of higher education institutions and accredited study programs, which gives a clear message of the importance of quality. However, the accreditation of higher education institutions and study programs is only starting (Commission Staff Working Document, Kosovo, 2016 – Report).

In **Bosna and Hercegovina** the coordination among entities responsible for quality assurance is lacking, particularly in pre-school, primary, and secondary education. In higher education, there is a need for enhanced coordination and collaboration between the state-level Agency for the Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance and the Republika Srpska Agency for Accreditation. Additional initiatives are required to establish comprehensive national education statistics. Furthermore, the collaboration between educational institutions and the business sector should be strengthened, as the current level of cooperation is insufficient. The alignment of education with the needs of the labor market is still inadequate, indicating a need for improvement in this crucial aspect.

Croatia is actively pursuing ambitious measures to enhance the quality of education. Although strides have been made in addressing access to education, particularly through the implementation of a national curriculum for early childhood education in the 2015/2016 school year, challenges persist. Notably, there is a significant issue with access due to an insufficient number of kindergarten places in both urban areas and smaller villages. Despite a modest increase of 6.4% in the number of preschool institutions over the past five years, the availability of kindergarten spaces remains a limiting factor (Nacionalni plan razvoja sustava obrazovanja za razdoblje do 2027 godine, 2023).

In higher education, the existing structure of tuition fees and scholarship programs is geared towards boosting enrollment in areas with high demand in the labor market. However, there is a misalignment between admission quotas for study programs set by public institutions and the actual demand in the job market. Beyond labor market dynamics, outdated curricula and a scarcity of high-quality work-based learning opportunities further contribute to the suboptimal employment outcomes for recent graduates across all levels of education (OECD iLibrary). Addressing these issues is crucial for improving the relevance of education to the workforce and enhancing employment prospects for graduates.

In **Serbia**, the continuous reform of higher education requires a particular focus on enhancing the relevance of its study programs. The persistent challenge of high emigration rates among young and skilled individuals underscores the importance of addressing factors that contribute to this trend. Realigning higher education programs with the needs of the job market and creating opportunities for skill development and practical experience can play a crucial role in retaining talent within the country. This emphasis on relevance is key to fostering an educational environment that better meets the demands of both students and the broader workforce.

In **Montenegro**, a significant step was taken with the adoption of a Strategy and Action Plan for the development of higher education for the period 2016-2020 in July (Jørgensen, 2018). This comprehensive plan encompasses various aspects, including the establishment of a sustainable model of financing and the alignment of educational outputs with the requirements of the labor market. The emphasis on these factors reflects a strategic approach to ensure that higher education not only meets the academic needs of students but is also closely attuned to the demands and dynamics of the labor market.

The country exhibits a moderate level of preparedness in the field of education, with notable progress achieved, particularly in the development of a strategic framework. However, certain challenges persist, particularly concerning access to quality education for children from non-majority communities and those with special needs. While the legal framework aligns broadly with European standards for protecting human rights, there are instances where laws are not fully or accurately implemented. Additionally, bodies responsible for safeguarding and promoting human rights face limitations in terms of staffing and financial resources, often exhibiting poor coordination and, in some cases, a perceived lack of independence.

Legislation pertaining to education has been brought in line with the law on general administrative procedure. However, the consultation process for reforming the higher education law, which should ideally involve students and professors, has encountered obstacles and remains stalled. Challenges persist in the under-resourcing of pre-school education. Furthermore, the systems in place for the professional development of teachers and career advancement within the education sector demand greater investment and more effective implementation.

The education and training system in **the Republic of North Macedonia** aspires to play a pivotal role in nurturing a contemporary democratic society. Its objectives encompass strengthening the socio-economic, scientific, technological, cultural, and civic facets of society. This lifelong learning system seeks to proactively address the needs of a dynamic and mobile labor market, promoting a constructive dialogue among socially responsible stakeholders. The overarching aim is to drive an inclusive, innovation-based society that contributes to a high quality of life.

3. Current trends and developments in higher education quality and quality assurance within the EU and Western Balkans region (Western Balkans Ministerial Conference, September 2023)

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia, in collaboration with the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) Secretariat, convened a conference titled "Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education - Trends and Developments in the EU and Western Balkans". This gathering, which took place on the 26th and 27th of September 2023 in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, brought together ministers and other high-ranking government officials, representatives from competent

institutions, academia, and experts from both the Western Balkans and the European Union (EU). The conference aimed to delve into discussions and insights on the current trends and developments in higher education quality and quality assurance within the EU and Western Balkans region.

During this conference, which saw the participation of over 80 attendees, discussions revolved around the pertinent topic of the quality and quality assurance of higher education in the region. Participants engaged in conversations to deliberate on the current state of higher education quality and deliberated on the necessary steps to enhance it. The diverse group of conference attendees, including government officials, representatives from educational institutions, academics, and experts, collectively explored strategies and initiatives aimed at elevating the standards of higher education within the region.

The Western Balkans Ministerial Conference, themed "Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education - Trends and developments in the EU and Western Balkans," yielded significant outcomes. The conference culminated in the formulation of the Western Balkans Policy Recommendations for Quality in Higher Education. These recommendations provide a roadmap for advancing the quality and quality assurance of higher education in the Western Balkans. They are aligned with the commitments of the Bologna Process and adhere to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (European Standards and Guidelines-ESG). The recommendations outline strategic directions to further enhance the quality of higher education in the Western Balkans, aligning with European standards and fostering regional collaboration in this vital aspect of education as it is stipulated that:

“Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance”¹

Allowing higher education institutions to work with a suitable quality assurance agency that best fits their needs may help strengthen the institution’s own responsibility for quality, ensure a better engagement of institutional actors and foster self-reflection (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), 2014).

3.1. Further enhancement of the quality of higher education in the Western Balkans

Further enhancing the quality of higher education in the Western Balkans requires a concerted effort and strategic initiatives across multiple dimensions. The following key areas warrant attention and action to elevate the standards of higher education in the region:

Curricular Relevance and Innovation, industry collaboration between educational and industries to ensure curricula are aligned with the dynamic needs of the labor market. Integration of emerging technologies and digital tools into curricula to enhance the learning experience and prepare students for the demands of the digital era is a key for improvement of quality of education.

¹ See, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) European Students’ Union (ESU) European University Association (EUA) European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) In cooperation with: Education International (EI) BUSINESSEUROPE European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)

Encourage of the interdisciplinary approaches to foster a holistic understanding of subjects and equip students with versatile skill sets will. All western Balkan countries must use a Quality Assurance Mechanisms in the Alignment with European Standards and continuously work towards aligning quality assurance processes with European Standards and Guidelines, ensuring that accreditation procedures meet international benchmarks. Furthermore, one of the most important issues is transparency and accountability, by Promoting transparency in quality assurance processes, universities will make information easily accessible to students, educators, and the public and by establish mechanisms for accountability, it will be easy for all economies to maintain the credibility of accreditation.

An essential component of the education system, playing a pivotal role in ensuring the quality of in higher education and fostering student learning and development is investment in Teacher Training Development, teacher should continually invest in ongoing professional development by using different opportunities that keep them abreast of evolving educational practices and technologies. Also, by establishing clear pathways for career advancement in education, recognizing and rewarding educators for their contributions to student learning and development is a crucial aspect of supporting and retaining talented educators. Promoting active learning methodologies is a fundamental strategy for enhancing student engagement, fostering critical thinking skills, and encouraging the practical application of knowledge. Active learning shifts the educational focus from a passive, lecture-based approach to one that actively involves students in the learning process.

Enhancing support services for students, International Collaboration, Participation in Erasmus+ Programs that will facilitate the participation of students and faculty in international exchange programs, fostering cross-cultural understanding and exposure to diverse educational environments, encourage collaborative research projects with international institutions to elevate the research profile of higher education in the Western Balkans, financial Sustainability, by developing sustainable financing models for higher education, ensuring that institutions have the necessary resources to provide quality education without compromising financial stability, explore alternative funding sources, such as public-private partnerships, philanthropy, and research grants, to reduce dependence on government funding, continuous Monitoring and Evaluation, establishing robust systems for data collection, analysis, and evaluation to inform evidence-based decision-making in higher education policies and practices, regular review of programs Western Balkans can make significant strides in further enhancing the quality of higher education. The commitment to continuous improvement, collaboration, and alignment with international standards will contribute to creating a higher education system that prepares students for success in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this scientific paper has provided a comprehensive overview of the state of higher education in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on quality and quality assurance. The paper delved into the challenges and opportunities faced by each country in the region, addressing issues ranging from access to education and relevance of curricula to coordination in quality assurance and alignment with European standards.

The analysis highlighted common themes across the Western Balkans, such as the need for greater relevance of education to the labor market, improvements in coordination and collaboration between educational institutions and relevant agencies, and the imperative to address challenges in early childhood education and access to higher education.

The findings from the conference and ministerial discussions underscored the commitment of the Western Balkans to building a quality culture within higher education systems. The formulation of the Western Balkans Policy Recommendations for Quality in Higher Education reflects a collective effort to align with Bologna Process commitments and European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. These recommendations serve as a strategic guide for the region to enhance the quality and effectiveness of higher education, fostering collaboration and alignment with European standards.

As the global landscape of education evolves, marked by demographic changes, technological advancements, and economic shifts, the paper emphasizes the need for radical thinking and innovative approaches in designing, organizing, delivering, and assessing higher education. The forces of globalization, the digital revolution, and the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitate a redefinition of education parameters to meet the diverse needs of learners and societies.

The paper further acknowledges the role of quality assurance in achieving excellence and equity in higher education. Accreditation processes are recognized as vital mechanisms for objectively analyzing and ensuring the quality of education. However, the alignment of accreditation procedures with European Standards and Guidelines remains an ongoing challenge that requires attention and progress.

In summary, the scientific paper advocates for a transformative approach to higher education in the Western Balkans, emphasizing relevance, accessibility, and quality. The insights and recommendations provided serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders in the region to embark on a journey of educational reform and advancement, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic development and well-being of the Western Balkans.

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