

THE IMPACT AND DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL FACTORS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND LABOR MARKET INTEGRATION IN KOSOVO

Dardan LAJČI ¹, Bekë KUQI ^{2*}

¹ University "Haxhi Zeka", Faculty of Arts, Peja, Kosovo; dardan.lajci@unhz.eu (D.L.)

² University "Haxhi Zeka", Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment, Peja, Kosovo; beke.kuqi@unhz.eu (B.K.)

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Abstract: Education is considered as one of the key areas that directly affect the economic development of a country, as an adequate education system prepares the human capital that meets the needs of the labor market. As of now, when the process of globalization has taken a big leap forward, there is a requirement to have skilled, competent staff in the labor market. The needs of the labor market can only be answered by an adequate and contemporary education system. This paper will elaborate on the relationship between the education system and the labor market, with particular emphasis on the role of education in fulfilling the needs of the labor market, especially from the perspective of Kosovo. How much does Kosovo's education meet the labor market needs, not only in Kosovo, but also beyond. What are the areas in which Kosovo's education system needs to be improved in order to provide skilled employees to the labor market? The methodology used in this study involves conducting structured interviews with two main groups: employers and employees. The interviews were carried out with representatives from various sectors, both private and public, as well as from family businesses and non-profit organizations. The research was conducted in Kosovo, with a particular focus on the Dukagjini region. The main objective of this study is to analyze the phenomenon of early school leaving, the compatibility of qualifications with job positions and the challenges related to unemployment. It will also examine the impact of education and employment policies in addressing these issues, emphasizing the role of education and skills development in increasing employment opportunities. The research aims to provide recommendations for improving the connection between the education system and the needs of the labor market in Kosovo. The findings of this study are expected to shed light on the gaps between the current education system and labor market demands. By identifying these gaps, policymakers and educational institutions can work together to align curricula with market needs. Moreover, fostering partnerships between schools and employers could play a crucial role in bridging this divide. Enhancing vocational training and practical learning opportunities will be key in equipping students with job-ready skills. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to sustainable economic growth by promoting a more responsive and inclusive education system.

Keywords: education ,economic development, education perspective, human capital, labor market

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INTRODUCTION

Education is considered one of the key areas that directly affects the economic and social development of a country, because thanks to proper education, human capital is prepared to meet the needs of the labor market. When we are talking about human capital, according to Barro (2001), this element consists of health, education and other social aspects. Barro (2001) further explains that human capital is described as a determinant of economic growth only because it includes the very important element of education. The importance of human capital is also emphasized by Ozturk (2001), saying that no country can have sustainable economic growth without continuous investment in human capital. Similar to the views of Barro (2001) and Ozturk (2001) we find a lot in the literature. Many authors who have studied human capital closely link it with education and economic development. Teles & Andrade (2008) emphasize that it is precisely investment in human capital that makes the difference in economic growth between countries. Li & Liang (2010) in their paper mention the great impact of education as an essential part of human capital in the rapid economic development of East Asia, while Azam & Ahmed (2015) reaffirm the irreplaceable role of human capital development in economic growth. From what was said above, we can conclude that at this time, when the globalization process has gained momentum, the demand for skilled, professional and competent personnel in the labor market is imposed and that only a relevant and contemporary education system can respond to the needs of the labor market.

This paper elaborates on the connection that the education system has with the labor market, with special emphasis on discussing the role of education in meeting the needs of the labor market, especially from the perspective of Kosovo and the Western Balkan countries. The Western Balkans during the 1990s faced numerous conflicts that caused significant damage in almost all areas of life, including the education system. The consequences of the damage to education have followed the Western Balkan countries even after the conflicts, which has prevented this field from

* Corresponding author

serving the country's development as best as possible. When we talk about Kosovo, education in this country over the last three decades has also faced many challenges. The period of parallel education in the 1990s, the post-war period under UNMIK administration, and the period after Kosovo's declaration of independence represent three stages that have required many reforms and transformations. To what extent have these reforms and transformations in education succeeded in meeting the needs of the labor market in Kosovo? What are the areas in which Kosovo's education needs to advance in order to provide the labor market with prepared personnel? How does Kosovo's education compare to the countries of the Western Balkans when it comes to meeting the needs of the labor market? Reports and publications related to this issue show that the education system in Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries need to take new steps and reforms in order to prepare more professional personnel to meet the needs of the labor market.

The paper is organized as follows: After the introductory part, the literature review is presented, after the literature review, the period of education in Kosovo will be discussed, separately the period of education after Independence will be discussed with a focus on the objectives to meet the needs of the labor market, and finally, conclusions will be given.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As highlighted above, the role of education in meeting the needs of the labor market is an ever-present and very attractive topic for researchers around the world. It was stated above that Barro (2001) sees education as an essential element in human capital due to the fact that human capital is a determinant of economic growth. Effective sustainable development requires clear policies and principles, including sustainable resource use, diversity preservation, strategic planning, local community involvement, stakeholder engagement, and responsible marketing in the industry (Ziari & Mosleh, 2025). Furia et al. (2010) emphasize that education and professional skills acquired throughout life are undoubtedly key factors in achieving satisfactory results in creating a labor market suitable for economic development. The promotion of specific types of territorial attractiveness may prove to be a crucial element in the context of sustainable development planning, programming and project formulation, particularly in rural areas that are currently facing challenges in establishing viable economic activities and social innovation (Happ & Nemes, 2025).

According to Hanushek & Woessmann (2010), there are three mechanisms that make education a determining factor in economic development and one of them is "human capital development". The aforementioned authors emphasize that human capital development increases the labor market and at the same time increases the productivity of the labor force. But the question is which dimensions of education directly affect human capital development? Authors who have studied the relationship between education and the labor market have highlighted the level of education (Khorasgani, 2008), the quality of education (Hanushek & Woessmann 2010) and the education system (Furia et al., 2010) as elements that make the difference. When talking about education and the labor market, importance is also given in the literature to "mismatch".

"Mismatch" represents the case when the labor market and individuals receive wrong "signals" regarding the need for work/employment (Furia et al., 2010). According to Furia et al. (2010) mismatch creates three different situations in the labor market: - overqualification, - underqualification, - migration, and especially with the latter we are now being challenged in Kosovo. The part of the "mismatch" in education and the labor market is a very broad topic, which can be elaborated in other works, while in this paper it will only be mentioned as an important factor in the connection between education and the labor market, while the other elements mentioned above will be elaborated in more detail. Khorasgani (2008) has studied the role of higher education in the economic development of Iran for the years 1959-2000. The author mentions higher education as an extremely important pillar of the country's development, as it prepares the new generations to face the challenges of sustainable development. Socio-economic development policies for ethnic minority areas are measures, programs, and plans implemented by the government to promote economic growth and improve social conditions in ethnic minority areas (Tuan et al., 2024). Strengthening social capital helps improve lives and increase the ability to escape poverty sustainably for ethnic minority communities in rural areas (Pham & Mukhopadhyaya, 2022).

Khorasgani (2008) has used the model of Lin (2004), a production function as a function of labor, physical capital and human capital. From the paper we can also see that the author gives importance to the level of education. Khorasgani (2008) emphasizes that one of the reasons that has made the connection between higher education and economic development is that it is precisely higher education that prepares human capital to meet the needs of the labor market. According to the authors, the factors affecting the organization of knowledge training for civil servants include training programs and materials; Lecturers participating in teaching; Students' perception of knowledge improvement; The coordination between relevant agencies in the organization of knowledge training; Infrastructure and information technology applications (Hai et al., 2023). Hanushek & Woessmann (2010) give essential importance to the quality of education. The starting point of their study is the fact that a school year does not produce the same results in each country. The authors emphasize that health, environment, family and teachers also greatly affect these results.

Furthermore, Hanushek & Woessmann (2010) argue that the elements of education mentioned should not be ignored, because without these elements there cannot be a true picture of the connection between education and economic development. These authors emphasize that economic development directly depends on the skills of workers and that "what people know is of great importance". The authors Hanushek & Woessmann (2010) have concluded that the quality of education has strengthened the effects of economic development. Furia et al. (2010) elaborates on the education system as a very important factor in economic development and meeting the needs of the labor market. As mentioned above, the authors also give importance to the training part as a prerequisite for a good labor market.

The study by Furia et al. (2010) brings into focus the connection between the education system and the labor market in the 27 countries of the European Union. After the tests carried out, the authors have concluded that in the European Union there is a mismatch between the education system and the labor market. According to Furia et al. (2010), countries that

apply higher education standards also have greater employment opportunities. The authors finally suggest that European Union countries should implement an education system similar to Finland, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic in order to meet the demands of the labor market. If we look at the literature related to education and the labor market for the Western Balkan countries, it turns out that many authors and institutions from these countries and the European Union have had a great interest in it. Many scientific papers, reports and various summaries have highlighted the importance of educational development as a key factor in meeting the needs of the labor market and economic development. Uvalic & Cvijanovic (2018) in their paper they emphasize that in the 1990s, the Western Balkan countries faced major cuts in government spending, which mostly affected the health and education sectors. Furthermore, these authors emphasize that this trend of major non-investment in education has continued even after the 1990s, making these countries unable to follow the trends of Europe and developed countries in the field of education and innovation. Uvalic, M., & Cvijanovic, V. (2018) have highlighted the importance of investments in human capital and have argued that the Western Balkan countries (Croatia is excluded) must necessarily prioritize investments in human capital. As a conclusion, these authors recommend that the governments of the Western Balkan countries draft "more efficient industrial policies", which would directly affect the economic development of their countries. Education is also a high-priority area, mentioned in the paper, due to its importance in job creation. Bartlett et al. (2016) under the support of the European Commission have presented a detailed report on the needs of the labor market in the Western Balkans and the impact of higher education on employment. The authors in question emphasize that in the Western Balkans it is much easier to find a job with a university degree than without it, even if you are over-qualified for the given position. It is also noted that in the Western Balkan countries many graduates have an uncertain entry into the labor market and even when they are employed they go a long way until they find a stable employer. On the other hand, the report highlights the dissatisfaction of employers with employees.

According to the statements of the employers presented in this report, it is emphasized that newly graduated workers are not sufficiently prepared for the workplace. The report states that only half of employers think that graduated workers bring more value to the company than workers without a degree. To conclude, Bartlett et al. (2016) emphasize that the Western Balkan countries need to make deep reforms in the higher education system in order to develop human capital, prepare it for the labor market so that there is greater economic development. These reforms, according to the authors in question, include improving study programs, not having facilities for enrollment in universities, developing internship programs so that students have practical knowledge in addition to theoretical knowledge, etc. Bartlett et al. (2016) encourage greater cooperation between educational institutions and businesses in order to harmonize labor market requirements. Another issue that should be reformed in higher education is the reprofiling of the seven public universities in Kosovo. Reprofiling of universities, in addition to having a positive impact on preparing the right staff for the labor market, would also have a positive effect on increasing quality. However, the responsible institutions do not yet seem to have the will to implement it.

The role of the state is to ensure an effective education system, where the skills and competencies acquired by new graduates are in line with demand (Velciu, 2017). Meanwhile, UNESCO defines quality assurance in higher education as a comprehensive term that refers to a continuous, uninterrupted process of assessing (monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of the higher education system, institutions and study programmes (Vlasceanu, et al., 2007). According to the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (ENQA), the role of quality assurance is essential to support higher education systems and institutions to respond to these changing needs, ensuring that the qualification achieved by students and their experience during their studies remains the main and primary mission of the institutions (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2015).

The literature review section highlighted the key dimensions of education that affect the fulfillment of labor market needs. These dimensions (level of education, quality of education and education system) are studied in detail and it is precisely the reforms in these dimensions that fulfill the needs of the labor market in a country. Therefore, these reforms in these dimensions have also been recommended by reports for the Western Balkan countries as necessary for an efficient education system. In examining education in Kosovo, we will see that part of the education strategy in Kosovo and part of the reforms are precisely the aforementioned dimensions. One of the main characteristics of the labor market in the Western Balkans is the high long-term unemployment rates. According to Bartlett (2013), and although in 2000 there was a tendency for unemployment rates to decline; still unemployment rates in Kosovo alone remain very high compared to European Union countries. Structural changes in the Kosovo economy have not been accompanied by an adjustment in the skill structure of the workforce and a decline in the unemployment rate in Kosovo. Economic development was insufficient to compensate for job losses in the privatization process and due to the loss of markets for products and services.

This chain situation has led to the deepening of unemployment and poverty in Kosovo year after year. Unemployment and poverty are the biggest concerns of Kosovo citizens (UNDP, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the access to education and training is defined in terms of participation and investments. Participation means that an individual has had the opportunity to experience an education or training opportunity. By linking access with participation, this approach allows for the fact that entrance into education can provide individuals with knowledge and skills - and the economic returns associated with them - even when they do not complete their educational/ training programme. Investments refer to expenditure on education, financial aid to students, funding of education. Labour market outcomes are assessed mainly using different employment/ unemployment rates, as well as elements of earnings. In this study, the access to education and training is defined in terms of participation and investments. Participation means that an individual has had the opportunity to experience an education or training opportunity. By linking access with participation, this approach allows for the fact that entrance into education can provide individuals with knowledge and skills - and the

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The research questionnaire developed consists of questions related to the perceptions of employees and employers about the mismatch between the skills of newly employed graduates and the requirements of the workplace. The survey contained a total of 10 questions, mainly closed with multiple choices, from which we have selected those that are of most interest to our research for the results. Data were collected during October, November and December 2024. The research was administered by the authors of the paper, in support of master's level students of the "Haxhi Zeka" University in Peja. Representatives of the enterprises were contacted in advance and after being informed of the purpose of the research and permission was obtained. 150 surveys were conducted directly with representatives of the enterprises as well as with young graduates employed in those enterprises. The selection of employees was done randomly. Each interviewer was previously informed with an instruction letter with necessary explanations of the questionnaire. This careful process aims to ensure that the research findings are reliable and provide a clear overview of the perceptions of different actors about the skills needs and preparation of young people for the labor market. According to theories developed by authors such as Baron et al. (2001) the mismatch between the skills of graduates and the demands of the labor market is a phenomenon that directly affects the quality of organizational performance and the increase in unemployment among young people. This is reflected in the need for an education that is more integrated with the reality of the industry and its demands.

Recent research has also shown that there is an urgent need for a closer connection between higher education and different sectors of industry. Culture mediates action between actors and integrates personality and social systems. Culture throughout the particular ability to be, at least, in part, a component of other systems. Thus, in the social system, culture is embodied in norms, values and in the personality system it becomes an internal part of the actor (Lajçi et al., 2022) to ensure that graduates have the practical skills required by employers. In this context, the questionnaire that was administered aims to analyze whether there is such a perception among employees and employers, as well as to provide valuable data for educational policies and the professional preparation of young people.

Breen (2005) analyzes the impact of social groups and social classes on employment opportunities. He emphasizes that individuals from lower social strata often face significant barriers in the labor market, including mismatches in skills and educational opportunities. Although there are some favorable laws in place to promote gender equality and processes have been formed to achieve gender parity in workplaces and decision-making bodies, Kosovo's institutions and society still face significant obstacles in attaining complete equality. The representation of female employees in governmental and private organizations in Kosovo remains disproportionate to the gender distribution of the population. Despite notable advancements in this domain, the representation of women in decision-making roles remains disproportionately low (Lajçi et al., 2024).

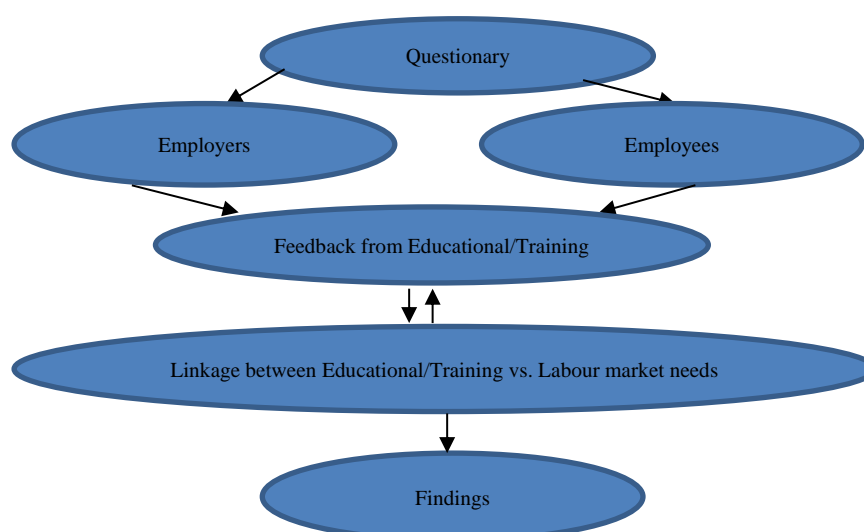


Figure 1. Methodology steps

Education in Kosovo after the Declaration of Independence (after 2008)

With the declaration of Kosovo's Independence, the path of reforms that had begun has only continued (Konxheli & Kadriu, 2018). This path has also continued in the education sector, bringing new strategies and projects funded by national and international institutions. The strategies, reforms and transformations that were already being undertaken had the realization of the most basic goals of the education system "meeting the needs of the labor market and economic development". One of the largest projects, with the aim of linking education with the labor market to improve employment conditions and economic development, is the project "Harmonization of Education with Labor Market Requirements (Kosovo)", supported by the European Union and the Austrian Development Agency with co-financing from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST, 2015). This project was signed in 2015 and its focus was based on promoting policies that encourage students to orient themselves in important and strategic areas for the development of the Kosovo economy such as agriculture, engineering and medicine (MEST, 2015). The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has presented two strategic plans for education in Kosovo in the last decade: the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011-2016 and the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021 (MEST, 2015 & 2017). Both of these strategies have as one of their main objectives the creation of conditions for the development of education in such a way that education meets the needs of the labor market (PSAK 2011-2016 & PESAK 2017-2021). One of the main challenges of higher education, highlighted in the KESP (2017-2021), is the "mismatch of study programs with labor market requirements".

This challenge in this strategy is foreseen to be overcome by conducting a study on the connection of higher education programs with the labor market. This study in the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (2017-2021) is mentioned as being the basis for the plan and profiling of public universities in Kosovo. Another possibility for overcoming the above-mentioned challenge according to the KESP (2017-2021) is cooperation with businesses, the creation of a system for labor market analysis, etc. The Kosovo Chamber of Commerce (KCC) has also conducted a study on the challenge of meeting the needs of the labor market by education in Kosovo. In 2017, the KCC published the report "Lack of skilled labor – a challenge for businesses", which highlights the lack of qualified staff for Kosovar businesses. In the question "How difficult is it to find qualified workers?" it appears that Kosovar businesses have many difficulties in finding staff. Kosovo Chamber of Commerce (2017) – "Lack of skilled labor – a challenge for businesses". Therefore, coordination between firms or employers and higher education institutions is very important and is one of the main topics often called "University-industry cooperation" (Healy et al., 2012). This finding is worrying, but not unexpected considering the reports of both domestic and international institutions not only for Kosovo, but also for other Western Balkan countries. This report once again confirms the need for deeper reforms in the education system in Kosovo.

It is positive that the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology share the same recommendations on the issue of the role of education in the labor market. These recommendations are only part of the Education Strategy (2022-2026) accompanied by the insufficient quality of study programs, the deficient academic infrastructure, the limited capacities for quality assurance and professional development of academic staff, the limited number of publications in international journals and the unfavorable academic staff-student ratio, necessarily require increasing the quality of higher education through the review of study programs, the advancement of academic infrastructure, the promotion of excellence in teaching and research and the implementation of high standards of institutional evaluation and study programs. Education in Kosovo has suffered greatly due to the situation of the 90s, but it has also taken concrete steps to provide the most professional cadres to the Kosovo labor market. Kosovo has a concrete strategy to achieve this goal and the application in some areas has already begun.

However, according to the report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2015), but also official statistics show that the quality of education in Kosovo is unsatisfactory at all levels, including the PISA test (Programme for International Student Assessment) which confirms this situation. Meanwhile, according to the European Commission Report 2018, financial support for education and training in Kosovo is only 4.7% of GDP, while for science it has decreased, respectively reaching 0.1% of GDP. Job mismatch is a new concept in the labor market and which manifests the general state of a country's economy. Initially, the concept of job mismatch was understood as a lack of balance between employment and unemployment. Since the 1970s, this concept has been recognized in the literature as "structural mismatch", to explain high unemployment rates, despite the existence of many jobs.

This mismatch has been considered a serious threat to economic growth and development (Bartlett et. al. 2016). Referring to this study, the level of mismatch of the skills of young graduates with the job duties they perform is different. Referring to the data of this study, the direction of Business, Administration and Law has the greatest mismatch. In 2016, there were 9066 graduates in this direction outside the labor market, because there was no demand for such a number. Meanwhile, there was a lack of graduate profiles in natural sciences - Mathematics and Statistics, where the labor market was in a shortage of 3176 cadres of these profiles. These figures speak best of the degree of mismatch and the damage caused to the economy due to the ineffective use of human capital in the Republic of Kosovo.

Relevant laws in the field of higher education and vocational training

Law on Higher Education

The Law on Higher Education in Kosovo forms the comprehensive legal basis for: "regulation, functioning, financing, quality assurance in higher education in accordance with European standards as well as the role of the state and society in the development of higher education in the Republic of Kosovo" (Article 1). The structure of learning

credits that a student must achieve for diplomas of the respective levels is based on the European Credit Transfer System and the European Qualifications Framework. From the relevant institutions for the formation and successful implementation of higher education policies, the law identifies the Ministry of Education as the primary institution for the development of plans, authorization, distribution of funds, etc.; the Accreditation Agency as the body responsible for accreditation, etc. – for which the relevant principles and provisions are also allocated. The law also sets out provisions for licensing private education providers (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2011).

In Kosovo, the accreditation process is applied, which according to the legislation in force implies formal recognition that a higher education institution and its programs meet internationally accepted quality standards and that its qualifications give their holders, in accordance with the law in force, a number of rights, such as the possibility of access to a further level of education, specific professions and the use of a title (Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Kosovo, no. 04/L-037, September 2011, Article 4). In recent years, the number of students in higher education has been decreasing and this decrease is greater in public higher education institutions in Kosovo. In the academic year 2020/21, 95,335 students (57.4% in the public sector, 42.6% in the private sector) continued their studies in accredited higher education institutions in Kosovo, of which 58.5% were girls/women. Based on the latest data (MEST, 2022) in 2020/21, about 56.3% of students in the age group 18-22 years old, attend higher education in Kosovo. Female participation in higher education is at a satisfactory level. Girls/women make up 59.5% of students in the public sector and 57.1% of students in the private sector. The gender parity index in higher education in Kosovo is 1.41.

Law on Pre-university Education

The Law on Pre-university Education structures levels 0-4 of ISCED (International Standards for the Classification of Education which are approved by UNESCO) in Kosovo. Regarding this period of individual development, pre-university education aims to develop the personality, talent and mental and physical abilities of the student to the full potential of the student; advancing the creation of basic scientific knowledge, communication skills, observation and analytical skills, creativity, independence and related learning skills; respecting human rights in the international framework and according to the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, etc. (LAW NO.04/L –032 ON PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO, Article 1).

Of great importance in relation to the law are the principles and provisions on access to education, where a great focus is given to the inclusion of all groups of the population of Kosovo in pre-university education. The law also divides the competencies and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and identifies the competencies of other relevant bodies. Thus, the pre-university system is organized according to the relevant ISCED levels and the main stages of the National Curriculum Framework (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2011).

Law No. 04/L-138 On Vocational Education and Training

According to Article 1 of the law: “The purpose of this law is to regulate the system of vocational education and training in accordance with the needs of the economic and social development of the Republic of Kosovo, including economic and technological changes, labor market requirements and the needs of individuals towards a market economy, by optimally utilizing financial, human and infrastructure resources” (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2013, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=8676&langid=2>). The law also structures the provisions of the relevant institutions, whether public or private institutions qualified for vocational education and training. The structure of institutions and provisions for vocational education and training according to the law reflects the scope towards the development of competencies depending on the career and market needs.

Law on Adult Education and Training in the Republic of Kosovo

This law, according to Article 1, aims to “regulate the entirety of the processes for adult education and training, as an integral part of the education system in Kosovo”. The law sets out the basic provisions regarding curricula, accreditation of qualification agencies, testing methods and sets out the roles and competencies of education institutions in Kosovo (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2013). Law No. 03/L-060 on National Qualifications (<https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2606&langid=2>). The main purpose of the law is to create a Qualifications System. This system is based on the National Qualifications Framework, which means that it establishes the framework of qualifications at the national level based on criteria and requirements that are consistent with the European Qualifications Framework. The law has the following objectives: “to improve the recognition of qualifications at all levels of formal and non-formal education and training; to ensure that qualifications meet the needs of the labour market, economy and society; to regulate qualifications, assessment and certification, based on quality and standards; to improve access to assessment and recognition of prior learning; to make the qualifications system flexible and transparent; to improve opportunities for improvement and transfer for all” (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008).

Law on Education in Municipalities of Kosovo

The law specifies the responsibilities and competencies that the municipalities of Kosovo have in education. According to Article 4: “Municipalities have full and exclusive powers, insofar as they pertain to local interest, while respecting the standards established under applicable legislation regarding the provisions of public preschool, primary and secondary education, including the registration and licensing of educational institutions, the hiring, payment of salaries and training of teachers and administrators”. In addition to the powers, the law also regulates the licensing of education and education personnel by municipalities. Summary of challenges in higher education and vocational

education The Strategic Plan for Education in Kosovo 2017-2021 has also identified some of the biggest challenges of the education sector in the country, which are summarized below.

Within the framework of labor market policies, some of them that are implemented in EU member states can be listed: Employment services; Training, Employment incentives, Employment support and rehabilitation, Direct job creation, Incentives to promote start-ups, Social care for the unemployed, Early retirement (Blache, 2011).

Table. 1. Main challenges in education in Kosovo (Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Strategic Plan for Education in Kosovo 2017-2021, 2016)

Challenges in higher education	Challenges in vocational education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to respect quality standards in higher education institutions • Failure to adapt study programs to labor market requirements • Insufficient presence of scientific research in higher education institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incomplete legal framework in higher education • Ineffective international cooperation in higher education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low and unsatisfactory staff/student ratio • Weak administrative capacities and inadequate infrastructure • Lack of a financing plan based on efficiency and accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mismatch of VET programs with labor market demands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak quality assurance mechanisms • Lack of career counseling and guidance • Incomplete framework for occupational standards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe funding shortages • Serious deficiencies in practical work and professional practice • Lack of adequate training and background for teaching staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in providing VET teaching materials • Lack of Core Curriculum for VET • Problem of sustainability of competence centers and their further development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of efficient adult education system

Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Kosovo and the European Union Article 107 Education and Training (Council of the European Union, 2015)

The Parties shall cooperate with the aim of raising the level of general education and vocational education and training, as well as youth and youth work policies, as a way of promoting skills development, employment, social inclusion and economic development in Kosovo. One of the priorities for the higher education system is to achieve adequate quality standards of its institutions and programmes in line with the objectives of the Bologna Process and Declaration. The Parties shall also cooperate to ensure that access to all levels of education and training in Kosovo is not subject to discrimination on grounds of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. Cooperation shall aim to address the needs of students with disabilities in Kosovo.

Cooperation shall also aim to develop capacities for research and innovation, in particular through joint research and innovation projects involving all stakeholders and ensuring the transfer of expertise. Relevant EU programmes and instruments will contribute to the improvement of educational structures and activities, training, research and innovation in Kosovo. Cooperation shall take into account priority areas related to the EU *acquis* in this field.

One of the objectives of the European Union is also “Smart Growth”, which should be supported by the “Knowledge Economy” framework. This component is also applied to the Western Balkans through the South East Europe 2020 framework, which aims to significantly increase average labour productivity.

It is considered that such an increase in productivity can only be achieved if supported by an 18% increase in the number of highly qualified workers (Regional Cooperation Council 2015).

Social work and the university curriculum

The curriculum at the university is based on international curricula. In general, the high unemployment rate is a challenge also for the prospective social workers, and the state itself has few social services, but now there is a social center in every municipality (in total there are 33 in Kosovo, in Pristina, for example, there are 3. Social services are often also carried out by NGOs, but in order for NGOs to work, they must be licensed. A social worker in Kosovo earns about 300 euros, a primary school teacher 350 euros, and the average income in Kosovo is about 270 euros.

As already mentioned, there is current social assistance in Kosovo, but it is not easy to get it. Criteria are: you must have no income and no assets, you must have children under 5 years and you must not be able to work (Kostovicova, 2005; Mehmeti & Radeljic, 2017) The curriculum of social work education in Kosovo is similar to the curricula in European countries where university education is applied according to the Bologna Declaration.

The social work education curriculum in Kosovo is focused on several perspectives such as: human behaviour and social environment, social policies, practice and research (Gashi, 2022). The European Commission's 2016 Science, Research & Education Progress Report, respectively the European Union's enlargement policy, concludes that: Kosovo has limited capacities for research and innovation, the research budget is insufficient in relation to GDP. The law on science and scientific activities is in process, limited administrative capacities for science and research, mismatch between study programs and the labor market European Commission (2016). The effects of educational reforms in Europe do not constitute innovation in themselves if they do not affect the consciousness of those who want a more enlightened society. However, this is impossible to happen without a creative approach to educational reforms, which would produce in practice well-being for all. In this context, there are numerous indicators that say that the number of universities in Kosovo has increased, but students are less likely to be employed than their colleagues in the EU.

It is precisely here that the role of universities should be sought in accelerating the creation of a common space, without which decent competition in other wider spaces of knowledge, whether regional or European, would not be possible (Institute of the Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of Albanians, 2020 Website).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Almost everyone who graduates from university has the main goal of finding a job that matches their qualifications and the profession for which they graduated. Everyone has a hope that with their own efforts or with some external help they will achieve their career goals and fulfill the expectations of themselves and their families who have financially supported their education. As the results of this research show, being highly qualified reduces the likelihood of remaining unemployed by almost half compared to less educated groups. In Kosovo, the unemployment rate of young graduates was 19% according to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS, 2016). The approximate percentage is also in 2024. If past trends continue, a faster growth in the employment of young graduates can be expected in professional, scientific and technical activities, including architecture, engineering, construction, retail and wholesale trade, health care, etc.

According to the data from this study, vertical mismatch is widespread in Kosovo: only 47 percent of higher education graduates are well matched to the job requirements they hold, 53 percent of graduates do not match the skills required in their jobs, of which 42% are overqualified and 11% are underqualified. The survey also shows that 28 percent of graduates by profession are not in line with the requirements of the jobs they hold. Even in the case of research in Kosovo, it has been shown that the level of qualification and the type of skills acquired affect the possibility of finding a well-matched job.

It has also been shown that graduates who had some work experience through an internship or some other form of experience were more likely to end up in a real job compared to others. This highlights the importance of work experience gained through an internship in facilitating the transition of graduates into the labor market. In Kosovo, we also have the phenomenon of dropout, which leads to a low completion rate. Many of those who graduate face long-term unemployment. Of those who find work, many do not match their field of study or level of qualification, then health, welfare and education, perhaps also due to the small number of jobs and the relatively higher number of registered students.

The majority of workers interviewed state that matching their qualifications is one of the most important factors that influenced them to apply for this job. A total of 150 structured interviews were conducted in the study, of which 30 were conducted with employers and 120 with employees. Within the framework of the interviews conducted with employers, 35.5% of the sample consists of private enterprises, 23.3% public institutions, about 10% family businesses, 9.4% public enterprises and 3% non-profit organizations. The total number of interviews conducted is distributed across all regions of Kosovo, with a greater concentration in the Dukagjini region. Most workers (55%) state that the work they do is in line with their qualifications. Nearly 20% of workers interviewed hold a position outside their qualifications due to not being accepted into a job that matches their qualifications. While 12% of workers give up the opportunity to work at their qualification level in exchange for a better salary in another position.

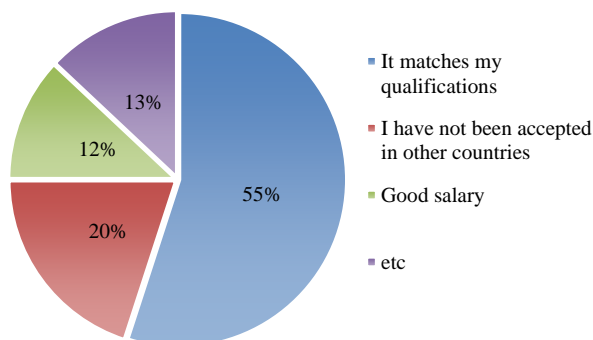


Figure 2. The importance of factors that influenced applying for a job

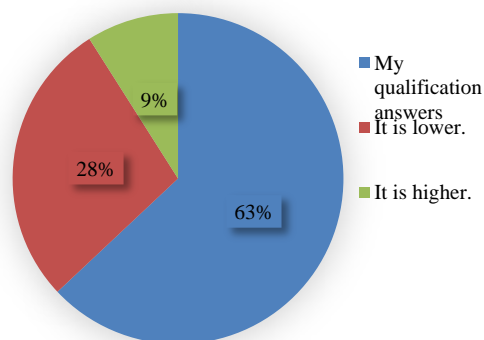


Figure 3. Job matching with qualification

Most workers interviewed appear to be satisfied with their chosen profession, as 63% of them stated that they would not change their profession if they had the opportunity to redefine themselves. For those who stated that they would change their profession if they had the opportunity, the profession with the highest frequency that would be chosen by workers is information technology. Most employers (46%) state that their profession is suitable for the work they do.

In addition, (35%) are close or similar to their profession, which is another very important reason that shows that graduates are mainly employed in fields or jobs that they have knowledge of. Nearly (19%) of employers state that they do not match the work they do and their profession at all. However, this percentage is considered high since it also brings difficulties in implementing the work they do and conflicts with the general framework of respect for local legislation and social inequality in the labor market. The majority (55%) of employers state that graduates face difficulties in employment due to lack of work experience. In addition, another very important reason that graduates face during employment is the mismatch with the field of study. Nearly 13% of employers state that graduates face difficulties in employment due to the mismatch of the level of qualification with the job position.

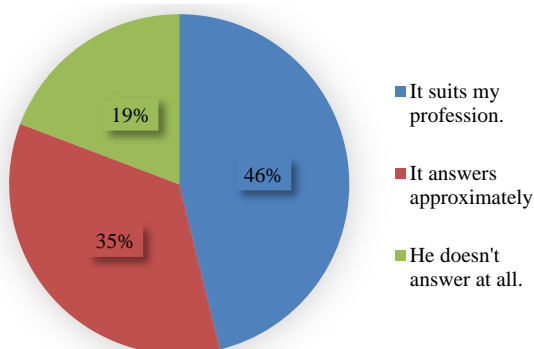


Figure 4. Adaptation of the profession to the workplace

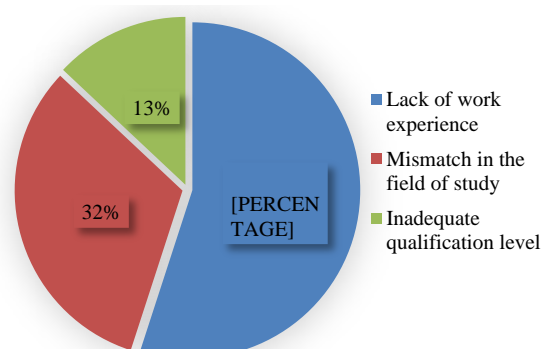


Figure 5. Difficulties faced by graduates in employment

CONCLUSION

This research elaborated on the role of education in the labor market from the perspective of the state of Kosovo, making comparisons with the countries of the Western Balkans. The education system in the countries of the Western Balkans has undergone many transformations in recent years, especially after the 1990s. When talking about education in Kosovo, it is more than evident that the last three decades have been quite a challenging period, starting from parallel activity for existence to major transformations and reforms in order to meet the needs of the labor market with professional staff. From the research conducted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce and other local and foreign organizations, it emerges that in Kosovo the education system needs additional reforms in order to provide the labor market with the most professional staff.

Similar conclusions are given for other countries of the Western Balkans. In this section, it cannot be said that Kosovo is doing better or worse than neighboring countries, since all of them, without exception, have begun reforms and need deeper reforms to meet the needs of the labor market. Finally, this paper, similar to the Strategic Plan for Education in Kosovo (2017-2021), the report of the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce (2017); Bartlett et al. (2016), reiterates that the key to the development of education in the service of the labor market is the cooperation between businesses and educational institutions, especially higher education.

Kosovo and other countries in the Western Balkans should work hard in this direction to have an educational system in the service of the labor market. Based on the experience of some of the European Union member states in relation to EU programs, the main recommendations for Kosovo institutions are: The Government of Kosovo should analyze and discuss the costs - benefits of participating in European Union programs with academia, universities, higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as civil society; Universities should create partnerships with industry, respectively businesses, in a way that affects the increase in employment, respectively the preparation of personnel for the labor market;

The Government of Kosovo should provide additional funding at the local level in support of applications to EU Programs, especially the Horizon 2020 Program; Kosovo institutions should increase absorption capacities in order to optimally utilize funds, namely European Union programs in the field of education and innovation, considering the fact that in the new Erasmus+ Financial Framework there will be an increase in funding from 14.7 to 30 billion. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) focuses on respect for key democratic principles and core elements that are at the heart of the EU's single market. The SAA will establish an area that allows for free trade and the application of European standards in other areas such as competition, state aid and intellectual property. It will also help the implementation of reforms designed to achieve the adoption of European standards by Kosovo.

Other provisions cover political dialogue, cooperation in a wide variety of sectors ranging from education and employment to energy, the environment and justice and home affairs (Council of the European Union, 2015). Vocational schools, whether public or private, should increase their efforts to register their programs with the relevant accreditation authorities, so that the titles obtained through these programs have validity at the international level.

This would not only increase the value of vocational education in the country, but would also make the programs offered significantly more attractive to potential followers. Institutions should develop post-secondary and tertiary vocational education programs, so that participants in vocational education are given opportunities for continuous development throughout their careers. The lack of alternatives after completing secondary vocational schools can be a discouraging factor for students to pursue vocational education.

Occupational standards should serve as a guarantor of the qualifications of individuals in different fields. Occupational standards, which should be created in harmony with the European Qualifications Framework, aim to prove that a person who has obtained that occupational standard is fully competent to perform the assigned work. The process of developing these standards should be accelerated in the future. Education and the Labor Market in Kosovo and the European Union American Chamber of Commerce in Kosovo.

For employees, university preparation and work experience are considered the two most important and determining factors for employment. There is a significant mismatch in terms of qualification with the position they hold (vertical mismatch), the mismatch is also high in the horizontal one. Developing the skills of graduates through the modernization of teaching methods is considered important in providing the opportunity for graduates to be employed.

Graduates with work experience are more likely to find a job. Additional training outside the enterprise is considered very important in providing the opportunity for graduates to be employed. Employers consider it very important to hire a recent graduate if the monthly salary for a period of time is financed or co-financed by a donor. Labor legislation should be amended in order to promote the creation of a dynamic labor market that promotes competitiveness and productivity of the workforce. Also, potential obstacles, whether stemming from this legislation or from any other legal act, that in one way or another affect informality and discriminatory practices in the workplace, should be eliminated.

In this regard, it has already been evidenced that maternity leave is such a source of discrimination and informality. Urgent steps should be taken to address structural problems in employment, and in particular in indicators related to the activity rate of the working-age workforce. Kosovo in this regard is extremely poor, both in comparison to the European Union average and in a regional perspective. Kosovo should take rapid steps towards strengthening social dialogue, as a crucial link to guarantee the harmonization of education and labor policies with demand and need in the private sector.

The Economic and Social Council should be more inclusive, and as such should provide input towards addressing the many challenges in this sector in the country. The Danish model of “flexicurity” best demonstrates the many positive results with genuine dialogue between social partners.

Recommendations

The perspective of education and the labor market in Kosovo is the need to pay greater attention to vocational education, which has occupied an increased space in the public discourse, the situation in this sector still leaves much to be desired. In order to prioritize vocational education and training and create a dynamic labor market, the government must undertake a series of targeted reforms, which will help in the recovery of this sector: The budget dedicated to vocational education and training should be significantly increased so that this area is truly prioritized.

Vocational schools have numerous difficulties both in terms of working conditions and equipment needed for laboratories and school facilities, as well as in terms of qualified staff who can provide knowledge to program participants. Therefore, a key step in this regard is the greater allocation of the budget for vocational schools.

Another recommendation that also takes up space in UNESCO's work is the need to encourage and create the prerequisites for diversifying the way vocational schools are financed by creating opportunities for investment from the private sector. This is not currently practiced in vocational education in Kosovo, but the creation of incentive policies that would enable and encourage the private sector could create new financing opportunities.

The government should develop policies to encourage companies to be involved in dual education programs. Such policies are also implemented in the most developed countries in Europe where there is a better tradition of vocational education, through the provision of fiscal incentives for participation in dual education programs.

For example, such a policy would be for companies to be exempt from personal income tax for those workers who are engaged during the period when they attend a vocational school. Vocational education should be promoted as a career option among young people in Kosovo, considering the tendency to prioritize higher education at the expense of vocational education. Such promotion should be addressed to ninth grade students and their parents, as it is the first step when making a career-orienting decision according to the educational system scheme explained above. Such initiatives are already being implemented by various donor projects, but a more structured approach is needed to raise awareness of the importance of vocational education and the employment opportunities that this sector brings to the new generations.

Institutions should encourage greater participation of the private sector in the development of educational programs and curricula, in order to create the preconditions where the programs offered are a real reflection of the needs of the private sector for the labor market. So far, educational institutions have not succeeded in encouraging the participation of businesses in industrial boards to a satisfactory extent, where they would have the opportunity to provide their contribution on the necessary profiles. Certainly, part of the responsibility in this regard falls on businesses themselves, which should have a more proactive approach in building lines of cooperation with educational institutions.

Limitations

From the limitations of this study, we can emphasize the lack of prior research in this field in Kosovo which would help us to have a greater clarity of the development context of education and social work. From a methodological point of view, the lack of a primary research that would provide us with empirical data on the basic issues addressed in this paper can be emphasized as a limitation. Limited access to archives as a result of the lack of hardcopy materials on this topic can be considered as another limitation.

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