



Republika e Kosovës
Republika Kosova – Republic of Kosovo
Agencia e Kosovës për Akreditim
Agencija Kosova za Akreditaciju
Kosovo Accreditation Agency



THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN KOSOVO

challenges and achievements for 2020, the impact of the pandemic and providing recommendations for increasing quality in the sector



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Supported by:

Qaint

Design:

Envinion

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This report has been supported from the Quality, Accountability, Integrity and Transparency in Higher Education (QAIN) Project.

The QAIN project is funded by Austrian Development Agency (ADA) with the contribution of the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI), and is implemented by the consortium KEC, ORCA and ZSI.

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“Education is not preparation for life;
education is life itself.”

[John Dewey]

ACRONYMS

KAA	Kosovo Accreditation Agency
KAS	Kosovo Agency of Statistics
ECTS	European Credit Transferring System
ENQA	European Network for Quality Assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
HEI	Higher Education Institution
SCQ	State Council of Quality
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
MESTI	Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation
KESP	Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021
IT	Information Technology
AI	Administrative Instruction

1. STRUCTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN KOSOVO

Higher Education is the highest level of education. Its role is therefore to foster development of knowledge, critical thinking, research and innovation skills necessary to prepare professionals of respective areas, but also decent citizens, responsible for economic, social and cultural development of the country. The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) is responsible for the regulation and development of the Higher Education in the Republic of Kosovo.

Higher Education in Kosovo is regulated with the Law on Higher Education (No. 04/L-037, date 31.08.2011)¹. Pursuant to Article 4 of this Law, the objectives of higher education are:

- First level – 3-4 years of studies by which the student reaches 180, respectively 240 ECTS. At the end of studies, the student obtains a Bachelor Diploma.
- Second level – 1-2 years of studies after completion of the first level by which the student reaches 60, respectively 120 ECTS. The student obtains a Master Diploma.
- Third level – program of doctorate studies with academic and independent scientific research character, after completion of the first two levels with 300 accumulated ECTS. These studies last at least three years and are completed with the student obtaining a PhD or Dr.sc diploma.

¹ . Law on Higher Education <https://www.masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2015/06/2-ligji-per-arsimin-e-larte.pdf>

Higher education system in Kosovo is implemented in accordance with the Bologna process ², which was launched in Europe in 1999 and resulted with the establishment of European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The process introduced profound reforms in higher education systems throughout Europe and as such was accepted by Kosovo in 2001. According to Bologna model, higher education in Kosovo is offered in 3 levels:

- 1 First level – 3-4 years of studies by which the student reaches 180, respectively 240 ECTS. At the end of studies, the student obtains a Bachelor Diploma.
- 2 Second level – 1-2 years of studies after completion of the first level by which the student reaches 60, respectively 120 ECTS. The student obtains a Master Diploma.
- 3 Third level – program of doctorate studies with academic and independent scientific research character, after completion of the first two levels with 300 accumulated ECTS. These studies last at least three years and are completed with the student obtaining a PhD or Dr.sc diploma.

In addition, any other post-secondary education in level 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, for which credits (ECTS) may be given can be considered as higher education qualification.

In the National Qualification Framework (NQF), ³ higher education levels include level 5, 6, 7 and 8.

² The Bologna Declaration of 19 June http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.pdf

³ . https://akkks.rks-gov.net/uploads/korniza_kombetare_e_kualifikimeve.pdf

2. KOSOVO ACCREDITATION AGENCY (KAA)

The Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) is a public, independent agency which accredits and reaccredits public and private higher education institutions in Kosovo. KAA was established in 2008 by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI), in accordance with the Law on Higher Education No. 2003/14. The legal basis for the operation of Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) is the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo (No. 04/L-037, dated 31.08.2011) and the Administrative Instruction on the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Kosovo (No. 15/2018).

KAA consists of an administrative structure, headed by the KAA Director, and a governing and decision-making body - the State Council of Quality (SCQ). The administrative structure of the KAA currently consists of the Director and 8 officials. In addition to the Law on Higher Education, MESTI issued a special Administrative Instruction on the criteria and procedure for the election of SCQ members (No. 05/2018, dt.15.03.2018), whereas the activities of the SCQ are regulated with the Regulation on the work of the State Council of Quality (No. 621/18D, dt.12.06.2018).

Due to situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, KAA adapted and reorganized its activities in line with the circumstances and recommendations from the Government of Kosovo to fight and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, in the meeting held on 19 April 2020, SCQ decided to have the accreditation process implemented in distance. The final decision that allowed for distance (online) accreditation was made by the former Minister of Education, Hykmete Bajrami. (Ref: 35/018

Date:07.05.2020). This Decision regulates the procedures for external evaluation by international peer reviewers via conference calls, during the period which the measures set to manage the emergency situation created with the Covid-19 pandemic by the Government of Kosovo were in place, as per the paragraph 1.2 of the Decision No.01/07, dated 11.03.2020.

The KAA initially started with distance (online) institutional accreditation, applying the best regional and European accreditation practices during the pandemic. After a successful completion of distance evaluation at institutional level, from July 2020 the KAA continued with the second phase of the process, evaluating study programs in the area of medicine, economy and law.

In 2020, the KAA completed the institutional evaluation of 14 HEIs, of them 5 public universities and 9 private colleges. Of 14 evaluated institutions, 6 were reaccredited and 8 were refused for institutional reaccreditation based on recommendations from international experts. In regards to study program evaluation, KAA evaluated 29 programs from the above-mentioned areas.

Successful accreditation activities that were implemented through COVID 19 pandemic represent an accomplishment for the KAA. The process was implemented using the best European practices for distance evaluation and it provided for the possibility to continue with the periodic evaluation of institutions and programs. In addition to distance evaluation implemented successfully, in 2020, KAA intensified its activities and important documents were drafted, such as:

- KAA Strategic Plan;
- Evaluation Standards for Doctoral Programs;
- Peer-review Experts Manual.

Another important activity in 2020 is the functionalization of the Appeals Committee.

However, KAA faces the following challenges to its successful operation:

- political interference and violation of KAA's independence;
- rejection of the Law on KAA;
- meeting recommendations by ENQA to reapply and have the KAA again in this institution;
- building KAA human capacities;
- having larger spaces available for the KAA to operate; and
- inclusion of students in SCQ and expert teams.

3. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Quality Assurance in HEIs includes a range of activities and processes, which means that all stakeholders have to be involved and take responsibilities to reach the common goal, i.e., constant improvement of quality. Accountability and enhancement are essential issues in quality assurance to support the development of a quality culture that would strengthen public trust in HEIs and quality of programs they offer.

There is a number of standards related to quality assurance in higher education institutions and their programs, which are measurable and used as indicators to evaluate them. Ministerial conference in Yerevan ⁴ (2015) where the revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) were approved re-emphasized the role of these standards to understand quality assurance in European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These standards focus on teaching and learning quality, including learning environment and its relation to research and innovation.

According to ESGs, higher education institutions are responsible to ensure quality and they should assure students, employers and wider public of the quality of studies and services to community. Following the establishment of Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), all HEIs have established their internal Quality Assurance Units that are responsible for the accred-

⁴ https://www.ehea.info/media/ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/72/7/European_Standards_and_Guidelines_for_Quality_Assurance_in_the_EHEA_2015_MC_613727.pdf

itation and reaccreditation of their programs. However, Quality Assurance Units in HEIs need to constantly develop in order to implement and promote quality standards. Formal establishments of Quality Assurance Units in HEIs in Kosovo and development of Regulations on Quality Assurance may be considered an accomplishment in this regard. Conducting periodical evaluation of HEIs, KAA evaluates to what extent quality standards have been met by respective HEIs, highlighting also the efficiency of their Quality Assurance Units.

However, many challenges remain in this regard, among them: training of quality assurance staff on ESGs (European Standards and Guidelines), increase in staff and student involvement in quality assurance processes, transparency of HEIs in regards to quality assurance results, transparency of HEIs in regards to accreditation process results, specifically publication of evaluation reports by KAA to inform students, etc.

To have effective Quality Assurance Units, which are key to advance HEIs development processes, Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) should constantly organize conferences and seminars addressing relevant topics and involving all HEIs. Through these activities, KAA will be able to identify difficulties faced by HEIs in meeting the KAA approved standards. International cooperation with higher education institutions from European countries with a tradition and culture in quality assurance in higher education is another way of providing opportunities for professional development of staff in Quality Assurance Units.

4. HIGHER EDUCATION IN KOSOVO IN 2020

In 2020, higher education was provided by 9 public institutions and 22 private institutions. Of 9 public institutions, 6 of them are universities, 1 is a University of Applied Sciences, 1 Faculty and 1 Academy. University of Mitrovica is not part of public HEIs because it is not subject to applicable legislation in the Republic of Kosovo.

Number of private HEIs in 2020 has changed, from 22 to 14, because 8 private colleges were not successfully accredited at institutional level, therefore they could not enrol new students in the academic year 2020/21.

This number of HEIs providing higher education qualifications is obviously too high compared to the population in Kosovo. Political class intention to increase participation in higher education after 2000 led to an expansion of private HEIs in Kosovo. Later on, the same happened with the public sector, with the number of universities increasing from 1 university in 2010 to 7 currently active. Increased number of higher education institutions in Kosovo led to a higher participation of youth of age 18-22 in this sector; as a result, Kosovo has a participation rate of around 73% in higher education, the highest one in Europe.

In 2019, number of students in higher education was



122,000
STUDENTS



with Kosovo at the
top of the list of
European countries

WITH 6,669 STUDENTS PER 100,000 INHABITANTS

On the other hand, completion rate compared to the number of enrolled students is too low. The data from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics ⁵ suggest that, in the academic year 2019/2020, total number of students in public HEIs was 59.934, whereas in private HEIs it was 14.787. Since there is no data for some of the private colleges, the number of students in private sector cannot be considered accurate.

Obviously, this increase and mass enrolment in higher education had negative effects in the quality of higher education, having in mind the low number of qualified academic staff, lack of research-scientific capacities in the country and lack of labour market capacity to absorb the university degree holders. Higher education is a strategic objective in Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021, (KESP) ⁶ drafted by the MESTI, and key priority in this area is improvement of quality in higher education institutions.

Current data in regards to percentage of students enrolled in public and private HEIs ⁷ in Kosovo show that around 52.1% of students are enrolled in Social Sciences - Business and Law, 12.3% in Technical Sciences - Engineering, 9.7% in Human Sciences and Arts, 7.1% in Medical Sciences, 6.8% in Education, 6.7% in Natural Sciences, Maths and Computer, 2% in Agriculture and Veterinary and 3% in services.

5 Statistikat e Arsimit 2019/20 https://masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2020/07/statistikat-e-arsimit-2019-2020_1.pdf

6 . https://masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2017/02/20161006-psak-2017-2021_1.pdf

7 https://masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2017/02/20161006-psak-2017-2021_1.pdf

These data show that there is a lack of development plans and coordination between higher education and labour market needs in the country. Since, there is no analysis of labour market needs for professional staff in specific areas of higher education, it is difficult to plan the development of new programs in line with the market needs.

Based on current situation, it may be concluded that developments in this standard are still at early stages and they require a lot of efforts from all stakeholders (MESTI, other relevant ministries, higher education institutions, employers) to have the qualifications matching labour market needs in the country.

Although there are some initiatives in this regard, such as establishment of boards of employers in several HEIs, still there are challenges to be addressed, such as:

- Serious approach and dedication from responsible parties to introduce changes;
- Professional analysis of labour market needs in the country by state institutions;
- Willingness of businesses/employers to cooperate;
- HEI willingness to periodically review their existing programs and modify them in conformity with market demands;
- New study programs drafted to promote job creation.

Accordingly, to introduce changes and to achieve progress, it is recommended for the MESTI to assign priority areas in higher education and quotes for students per study areas, then to promote internships as part of study programs and allocate ECTS credits for internships, to assure employment for the graduates in companies where they attend their internship, to encourage establishment of HEIs of applied sciences that will be directly related to industry, etc.

In regards to study programs, the data from the Kosovo Agency for Accreditation (KAA), suggest that in 2020, 234 study programs were provided by public HEIs (Bachelor, Master and PhD level (from the University of Prishtina only), and 128 accredited programs were provided from private HEIs in Bachelor and Master level. Although economic development in the country is slow, it is necessary to have a labour market analysis before developing new study programs by HEIs.

Table 1. Number of accredited programs in Public Institutions of Higher Education in Kosovo

No.	Institution		Number of programs accredited in 2020
1	University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"		156
2	University of Prizren "Ukshin Hoti"		20
3	University of Peja "Haxhi Zeka"		14
4	University of Mitrovica "Isa Boletini"		20
5	University of Gjilan "Kadri Zeka"		10
6	University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani"		3
7	University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj		9
8	Faculty of Islamic Studies		2
9	Academy for Public Safety		1
Total			234

Table 2. Number of private HEIs accredited in Kosovo, in 2020

No.	Institution		Number of programs accredited in 2020
1	AAB College		48
2	UBT College		39
3	Rezonanca College		8
4	Heimerer College		6
5	Universum College		6
6	Riinvest College		5
7	Dardania College		4
8	Evolucion Academy		4
9	IBCM College		4
10	AUK College		3
11	ESLG College		1
		Total	128

In regards to academic staff, number of academic staff engaged in HEIs and their qualification is important for quality purposes. The KAS data show that in the academic year 2019/20, the number of regular academic staff in public HEIs was 1297, and in addition to them, there were 761 engaged staff and 44 international staff. In the same academic year, the number of regular academic staff in private colleges was 668, whereas the number of engaged staff was 293. Compared to high number of students at country level, the number of academic staff is too low, indicating that

there is a remarkable lack of government policies and development plans in higher education institutions in Kosovo for academic staff development.

The increase in the number of Higher Education Institutions in the country also increased the demand for academic staff with a PhD level qualification, largely because it is a KAA requirement to have three professors with PhD level qualification per each evaluated Bachelor program and two professors with PhD level qualification for each Master program. With the low number of academic staff available in the country, this KAA requirement led to an increased competition between higher education institutions in terms of providing the staff required; furthermore, it caused a devaluation of academic grades and qualifications, which have not always been of the quality required. New public universities opened, which started to operate with the staff borrowed from the University of Prishtina, also contributed to this disproportion between the number of HEIs and academic staff. But even nowadays, although they have been operating for several years, the process of their own staff capacities development is facing difficulties and progressing slowly. There are no staff development plans in most of the HEIs that would enable them to plan the number of academic staff over the years. Improvement of staff/student ratio, currently far from European standards, by increasing the number of academic staff in HEIs, is another challenge.

In terms of research-scientific work, key missions of HEIs are education and scientific research development, therefore European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) suggest to have the scientific research included in HEIs evaluation, along with all other activities. In Kosovo, research-scientific activity at country level is regulated with the Law on Higher Education and the Law on Research-Scientific Activities. Apart from these two basic laws, HEIs have their Statute and other internal regulations adopted to regulate scientific activity in their institution. HEIs research-scientific activity is included in HEIs strategic development plans, therefore Universities that have scientific activity included in their mission, have Scientific research strategies drafted for specific periods of time. Academic community in each higher education institution is responsible to establish criteria for research ethics to assure the quality of scientific research and to prevent potential academic integrity violations.

Aiming to encourage scientific publications in international scientific magazines with reviews in the platforms specified, MESTI drafted the Administrative Instruction 01/2018 on the recognition principles of platforms and international magazines with reviews. Despite this initiative, it is worth mentioning that some of the proposed platforms by MESTI in this AI do not provide for the required quality of scientific papers published by academic staff in HEIs in Kosovo.

Yet, although there is an increased number of published scientific papers in the magazines indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus in the University of Prishtina, the largest education institution in the country, scientific research achievements in higher education are quite modest and far from achievements in European countries. In most HEIs, the number of scientific publications per academic staff is too low; there are even professors with no paper published. Current funding of scientific research is not sufficient to motivate HEIs academic staff and promote science development. Moreover, lab infrastructure necessary for scientific research is limited and far from the standards required.

The best way to increase research-scientific activity in HEIs is to invest in lab infrastructure and development of human capacities. MESTI supports HEIs scientific work by funding scientific projects presented by academic staff. The Science Council within the Ministry, consisting of 7 members, evaluates the project proposals. But funding provided for scientific work is insignificant and it has no positive impact on the scientific results in the country. Therefore, MESTI is recommended to increase its support for the new academic staff in universities and colleges in terms of developing their research-scientific knowledge and skills, by providing opportunities for them to participate in research-in-residency programs in well-known European and global universities, academic mobility programs or funding their doctoral or post-doctoral studies in universities with high achievement in science.

“The increase in the number of Higher Education Institutions in the country also increased the demand for academic staff with a PhD level qualification, largely because it is a KAA requirement to have three professors with PhD level qualification per each evaluated Bachelor program and two professors with PhD level qualification for each Master program. With the low number of academic staff available in the country, this KAA requirement led to an increased competition between higher education institutions in terms of providing the staff required; furthermore, it caused a devaluation of academic grades and qualifications, which have not always been of the quality required.”

Adequate, quality and safe infrastructure in higher education is a precondition to create a learning environment that would enable students to achieve the learning results foreseen. Equal access should be provided to all students, irrespective of their previous level of knowledge. In particular, HEIs should provide safe access to facilities for disabled persons.

When distance/virtual learning was applied, as it was the case when emergency measures to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic were in place, currently operating HEIs enabled students to have access to a different learning environment, a digital learning environment using different electronic platforms. However, protection of students' privacy during digital communication remains a challenge; HEIs should ensure that there is data protection and other measures in place.

In terms of learning environments, classrooms, somewhere modestly equipped and somewhere else more advanced, labs, faculty/university libraries and environments outside HEIs, such as Kosovo National Library, are used by students in HEIs in Kosovo. In regards to literature to be used by students, the number of adequate textbooks for programs offered in HEIs differs from one institution to another. Supply of textbooks used in courses remains a challenge since universities do not share any funds to purchase books. Therefore, we have several professors in HEIs in both sectors, who even nowadays use outdated literature for economic, social,

science and technology developments at global level. In addition to print literature, HEIs should provide electronic access to literature for students, which is quite a challenging issue at country level.

Learning infrastructure, classes and labs in public higher education institutions often are old and lack maintenance, which in turn may demotivate students. Since there is no technical staff to maintain lab equipment in universities, even if the defect is quite insignificant, often equipment is taken out of use. Although there were efforts lately to better supply public universities' labs with appropriate equipment, accredited labs where more advanced scientific research can be conducted are still few in number.

During COVID-19 pandemic, it was evident that there is a remarkable lack of professional staff and labs equipped with modern advanced equipment (PCR) to support the Ministry of Health prevent the spread of the pandemic.

Since public higher education is funded by state budget, completion of requests presented by HEIs takes time and sometime they are fully neglected. MESTI is recommended to provide funding for HEIs in line with the study fields they provide, since specific fields of study (Medicine, Natural Sciences, Engineering, Information and Food Technology, Agriculture and Veterinary, Pharmacy, Arts, etc.) require for more expensive facilities and equipment compared to Social and Human Sciences.

5. ORGANIZING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Surely, 2020 was a year of imposed changes in higher education everywhere around the world, including our country. The situation with COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world and our country as well, forced the Government of Kosovo to take measures that led to limited free movement and total lockdown of the country in March. In response to new circumstances created, higher education institutions reacted promptly, undertaking all the necessary measures to ensure the continuation of learning process.

In a very short time, all HEIs responded to requirements to change the mode of delivering lectures, from face-to-face delivery to digital/distance learning. Short period of time available to implement changes and requirements to have the learning process continue as promptly as possible allowed for no training to be provided in regards to placement of content on digital platform, having in mind that the experience of teachers in using TI varied. However, existing TI infrastructure in most of HEIs was sufficient to support distance learning in the pandemic.

On the other hand, supplying technology devices for students was an evident challenge. Although it is believed that Kosovo has a good internet coverage, with 76.6% of Kosovo population using it, internet access with the required speed to access digital platforms and supply of technology devices was challenging having in mind the social-economic situation in the country.

Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) has carried out two external quality evaluations of higher education institutions during the period the COVID-19 measures were in place, in accordance with the MESTI Decision. The evaluation was carried out in distance via digital platforms, whereas coordination by KAA staff was done in person. The format of meetings between representatives of higher education institutions and international accreditation experts was not different from the agenda of meetings in person and for two consecutive years no obstacle was reported to hinder the evaluation process. During evaluations carried out in the last two years, international accreditation experts addressed the COVID - 19 pandemic situation and evaluated the learning process and quality assurance system through pandemic. According to the data collected from online visits and evaluation reports, KAA may conclude that higher education institutions managed to successfully switch from in-person learning mode to digital learning mode and overcome all technical challenges. However, a more substantial evaluation in regards to monitoring of learning process, adequacy of e-platforms used by students and staff, and substantial changes integrated by HEIs to improve online learning could not be done during online accreditation visits. Therefore, to have an evidence-based analysis in regards to challenges in higher education in Kosovo during the pandemic, an e-questionnaire was distributed by KAA to representatives of higher education institutions. 15 higher education institutions responded to this questionnaire, emphasizing key challenges summarized below:

- Fast adaptation to distance learning and lack of staff knowledge to use e-platforms;
- Technical issues related to internet access by students, lack of personal technology devices by students, management of several online sessions at the same time, preparation of many instructional materials in a short period, etc.;
- Low interactivity during lectures and exercises;
- Lack of commitment and low participation of students in lectures;
- Difficulties in carrying out practice and lab activities;

- Online evaluation of students;
- Limitation of academic staff and students in their research activities.

Despite emergency situation caused by the pandemic, with all institutions in the country obliged to perform their activity in accordance with the measures announced by the National Institute of Public Health to prevent the spread of the pandemic, HEIs were allowed to decide on their own about the way they would organize their scientific-learning process. Of 15 institutions responding to the questionnaire, 11 of them reported that they used Google Meet platform, whereas others reported that they used other platforms such as Zoom, Moodle, Coursera, Edx, etc. Of institutions that reported to use the Google Meet platform, most of them reported that they integrated it with their internal learning management system. When asked whether they have monitored distance learning development, most of the institutions reported that the rector, vice-rectors for teaching, deans and Quality Offices constantly monitored the lectures and exercises delivered online via reports generated by platforms, evidencing students' access to virtual classes and the start and end time of virtual classes.

Based on practices from European universities, Quality Assurance Offices played an active role during the COVID-19 pandemic in regards to strategic development, decision-making processes and development of academic staff in institutions. Quality of programs offered in distance learning, inclusion of students, quality of learning and provision of services for students are some of the priority responsibilities HEIs had to consider while organizing distance learning during the emergency situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Asked whether Quality Assurance Offices have organized any evaluation for distance learning, 11 institutions reported that they did the evaluation of distance learning, whereas 4 of them reported that they didn't. In two cases only, institutions stated that distance learning evaluation report was published on their institution's website, whereas in all other cases reports were not published and were drafted for institution's internal purposes only. Asked about the main findings of such evaluation or the challenges reported by staff and students, in general it can be understood that students were not satisfied with the learning process taking place online. Some of the main challenges evidenced from the eval-

uation of distance learning by HEIs included technical problems related to internet access and technology, lack of interactivity during lectures and exercises between academic staff and students, and difficulty of lecturing practice subjects and accomplishment of practice work by students.

During the period the emergency measures due to situation caused by COVID-19 pandemic were in place, all HEI staff showed willingness to adapt to online delivery mode, irrespective of their previous knowledge on using information technology. However, how adequate was the lecturing technique to the content offered and the nature of the subject, and whether that was understandable for students, remains a challenge. In the question for institutions in the e-questionnaire whether they organized any training on online learning for their academic staff, most of the institutions reported that they had trainings organized for their staff, however only a small number of them reported that the trainings were focused on teaching methodology. Most of the institutions responded that trainings were organized by TI offices on the use of electronic platforms and guidelines and tutorials were prepared.

Of 15 responses from HEIs



4

INSTITUTIONS ONLY REPORTED THAT THEY ORGANIZED TRAINING FOR THEIR ACADEMIC STAFF IN RELATION TO TEACHING AND TEACHING METHODOLOGY. 0



Of positive answers, one institution declared that they trained all their academic staff



one HEI reported that they trained

13

ACADEMIC STAFF,



one HEI reported that they trained

75

MEMBERS OF THEIR ACADEMIC STAFF



and the fourth institution did not declare the number of staff trained.

An aspect not sufficiently considered or not considered at all by HEIs, but also by state institutions, is the students' mental health. At the moment, there is no comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in Kosovo, that would highlight the experiences of HEIs through the pandemic, difficulties faced by academic staff and students and effects of lockdown on students in terms of social and emotional aspect. However, a study on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students has been carried out by the Department of Psychology, University of

Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina” (Hyseni Duraku and Hoxha, 2020) ⁸, analysing the experiences of students during distance learning. Most of the students reported moderated levels of perceived stress and mild psychological and somatic anxiety. Students reported that distance learning distracted them from the pandemic, whereas emotional support by teachers helped them to overcome this period. However, lack of attention and concentration, reduced motivation to attend lectures and to study, limited space at home, distractions from family members and numerous tasks delivered during lockdown were the main challenges faced by students in distance learning.

In addition to teaching and learning process, the pandemic had an impact on the intensity of research activities in HEIs as well, mainly in cooperations for international projects with European universities and beyond. Conferences and scientific symposiums that provide for opportunities to promote the scientific work of the academic staff from Kosovo, especially the work of the new scientists, were suspended. The pandemic had an impact also on international cooperation, with the travelling completely suspended during 2020. But, with the consolidation of digitally organized higher education activities, conferences and other meetings began to be organized similarly, re-establishing communication between academic staff from different countries and providing for opportunities to exchange experiences on distance learning, with HEIs from Kosovo being part of them as well.

After the end of academic year 2019/2020 during which distance learning was applied, HEIs that provide programs in the area of Medicine Sciences, Technical Sciences, Natural Science and Agriculture, decided to apply a combined learning mode from the start of the new academic year 2020/21. Strictly respecting the protective measures in place in terms of distance, use of masks and disinfectants, practice - experimental part of learning and exams were organized in respective faculties' environments.

8 . https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341654819_Ndikimi_i_COVID-19_ne_arsimin_e_larte_Studim_i_bash-keveprimit_ne_mes_te_shendetit_mendor_te_studenteve_qendrimet_ndaj_te_mesuarit_online_aftesite_e_te_mesuarit_dhe_ndryshimet_ne_jeten_e_studenteve

Despite challenges faced in the distance learning process, there were positive aspects as well highlighted by higher education institutions.

According to responses in the questionnaire, advantages of distance learning include:

- Safeguarding people's health during the pandemic;
- Flexibility in organizing lectures and exercises;
- Effective time management, with no need to travel;
- Reduced costs for students;
- Possibility to organize lectures with international professors at low cost;
- Advancement of technology knowledge for staff and students.

