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CURRICULUM AND ACADEMIC STRATEGY TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT

Kosovo's higher education system faces complex structural and functional challenges, including a persistent decline in student enrollment, limited employability of graduates, and the need to align academic programs with the demands of a contemporary labor market. The focus of this study is to conduct a systematic assessment of the educational culture and curricular relevance of undergraduate programs at *Haxhi Zeka* University (HZU), utilizing an advanced automated comparative analysis model tool founded on public data from job advertisements. The analysis results indicate that programs, particularly in STEM fields, are often not entirely aligned with professional requirements and employers' needs because of the structural limitations inherent in program-level curricula and pedagogical practices. While specific programs partially meet labor market demands, overall diversity and functional relevance of the educational offerings remain limited. The study emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing practice-oriented educational approaches, revising curricula periodically every three to five years, and strengthening collaboration between universities and the private sector. The implementation of automated systems facilitates precise identification of discrepancies between taught and required skills, thereby potentially enhancing graduate employability, contributing to regional socio-economic development, and significantly improving the adaptability of higher education institutions in responding to the dynamic demands of the labor market.

Keywords: Academic strategy, Curriculum relevance, Employment challenges, Socioeconomic environment, Haxhi Zeka University

INTRODUCTION

The role of knowledge is essential for the development and sustainability of today's economy. The foundations of contemporary economic development are education and culture (Gilbert & Pratt-Adams, 2020). Higher education in Kosovo plays a comparable role in the socio-economic development trajectory as do other higher education institutions. Thus, the higher education system in Kosovo is composed of a mix of public and private universities that confer accredited degrees (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels) (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation [MESTI], 2022). Since the post-war period, this sector has experienced significant expansion, particularly with the increase in private institutions, reflecting the high demand for advanced education. The competition sources for *Haxhi Zeka* University (HZU), inspired by the relevant legal documents, come from legally accredited higher institutions. Kosovo's accredited higher education institutions offer 400 study frameworks broken down to 236 bachelor's, 156 master's degrees, and eight doctoral programs. Kosovo's higher education system indeed requires significant adjustments and improvements, as it does not meet the quality and relevance standards of the job market (HERAS Plus, 2021). There has also been a decline in the number of students entering HE in recent years, and this drop is more notable in public universities. However, key tasks include addressing the staff shortage, the high professor-student ratio in public institutions (1:42), and the discrepancy between study programs and labor market demands. This constellation has a direct impact on the job market for graduates, with the percentage of employed graduates usually being less than 50%, varying from one program to another (MESTI, 2022).

The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI) has launched efforts to improve Kosovo's higher education system (World Bank, 2019). These initiatives include reforming curricula, incorporating professional experiences, and fostering greater collaboration with industry and other key stakeholders (Gilbert & Pratt-Adams, 2020).

One strategic priority is the development of professional programs at level 5 to prepare young people for direct employment or self-employment. According to an Alumni Association report on student employability, 65% of HZU graduates are employed in the private and public sectors, with roughly 3% declaring themselves self-employed (Alumni Association, 2023).

However, many individuals who have completed higher education in Kosovo seek employment, but their studies do not prepare them for the skills that businesses require. A survey conducted by the GAP Institute indicates that 54% of respondents convey the disparity between education and vocation,

particularly in the fields of general studies (88%) and exact sciences (76%). In comparison, education and health programs have comparatively tiny disparities (13-17%) (GAP Institute, 2020).
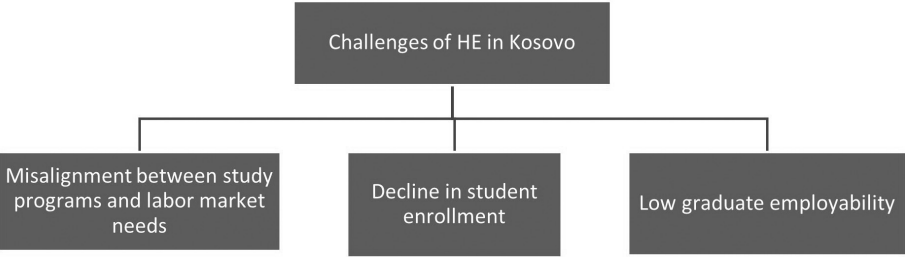
Current government figures show an unemployment rate of 10.7%. According to Monitor Magazine (Monitor Magazine, 2025), the rate among young people aged 15 to 24 is even higher at 21.2%. Among young people not attending university, approximately 34.1% of 15- to 24-year-olds are not in school (GAP Institute, 2021). The problem worsens because many companies believe that new graduates lack the digital skills and soft skills that are highly valued in many jobs, even if they hold a degree. These numbers clearly show a big problem.

Higher education programs in Kosovo do not prepare students well for available jobs. This results in many graduates lacking the skills employers need, facing jobs that are below their qualifications, or struggling to find work at all, especially among young people. We need to fix the disconnect between what students learn in school, what businesses need, and practical experience. This change, primarily achieved through updated courses, enhanced teamwork with companies, and increased hands-on learning, will help graduates find employment and stimulate the economy.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

Helping students learn more in Kosovo is crucial to preparing them for jobs, a vital step for the nation to improve and thrive. Kosovo aims to join the European Union, so its people require training for jobs available both in Kosovo and globally (Mazrekaj & Smajli, 2024). A significant problem exists in higher education institutions, because many courses do not fully prepare students for jobs available today or those expected in the future (Hapçiu & Osmani, 2018). In many cases, these types of programs lack interdisciplinarity, do not provide students with practical activities, or fail to establish connections between the classroom and the outside world. The Heras report (HERAS Plus, 2021) states that these aspects are necessary to produce not only well-rounded but also talented graduates. Several issues have been identified as obstacles to improving university studies. Students often struggle to find jobs after graduation, and technology presents additional challenges, such as the use of cloud services (Riza, Ajdari, & Hamiti, 2023). Hence, below are illustrated the main challenges of HEI in Kosovo.

Figure 1. *Kosovo Higher Education Challenges*.

A recent survey reports that approximately 60% of Kosovo's programs are related to education, arts, humanities, social work, and employment-related programs (College, 2020). Although there have been significant increases in enrollment in vocational programs, including law, the natural sciences, engineering, and mathematics, there have been drastic decreases in enrollment. These topics are essential for a workforce that will meet today's socioeconomic and technological challenges. With a focus primarily on the humanities and social sciences, the demand for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) professionals continues to grow, raising questions about unwise decisions in higher education. In other words, programs need to be well-constructed to promote distinctness and alignment between higher education and the labor market (ALLED, 2021). If not, serious questions arise around the future of education and workforce development in Kosovo. At the same time, the shift toward interdisciplinary academic programs will likely pose additional complexity for universities to ensure students learn the specific skills required for the fluid labor market.

Faced with these challenges, universities must conduct a comprehensive review of their curricula and align educational programs with industry needs to reflect employer expectations better. This strategy will not only improve the quality of academic programs but also contribute to the overall efficiency of higher education, preparing students for successful careers in an increasingly competitive job market.

The education and expertise covered in study programs must meet the market needs to guarantee employability (Marku, Tafaj, Hoxha-Jahja, & Kainulainen, 2024). Using data from MESTI, as well as additional data, researchers conducted a study of colleges and universities in Kosovo. The goal was to determine what types of training are necessary, attractive, and feasible. They also proposed practical strategies for integrating high-quality student learning with existing practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses an integrative approach that combines researcher interpretation and data-driven methods to examine and explain the relevance of educational programs to labor market needs. The authors employ a hermeneutic approach, analyzing data from official reports, statistical analyses, and surveys. This approach enables the drawing of comprehensive conclusions about the relevance of programs to labor market needs. Additionally, according to this author, researchers should conduct their research not as outside observers but as active participants in the research (Gummesson, 2000). This perspective contributes to a broader understanding of the problems affecting higher education (Gummesson, 2003).

In this context, cultural anthropology-based qualitative methods are essential for conducting systematic and in-depth research in educational settings (Dzogovic & Bajrami, 2023). By using hermeneutics as a fundamental framework and combining it with qualitative methods, researchers gain a deeper understanding of the interaction between educational practices and social realities in the labor market.

Furthermore, the programs offered by HZU were evaluated in comparison to other higher education institutions in Kosovo using a comparative analysis. This comparative framework was complemented by an automated data analysis process that extracted and analyzed labor market data from Kosovo's State Labor Market Portal.

Computer-assisted process assessment essentially involves collecting labor market data to analyze current employment conditions and accurately identify in-demand skills. This research aims to bridge the gap between educational potential and evolving business needs through this in-depth approach, taking the first step toward building a more efficient and effective education system.

Computer-aided automation includes:
– Data Collection and Cleaning: Labor market data, including job postings in fields relevant to HZU's programs (e.g., Economics, Technology, Education, Public Administration), are cleaned by removing duplicates, spelling errors, and inappropriate entries (Indrayan, 2019).
– Numerical Conversion and Similarity Assessment: The cleaned datasets and educational programs are converted into numerical formats, which allows algorithms to evaluate the similarity of texts and calculate alignment ratios for each study program.
– Relevance assessment: Automated algorithms calculate a relevance score (or "relevance rate") for each program and the entire curriculum, indicating how well the program meets job market demand.

– Comparative Analysis: The study assessed relevance at various academic levels and showed that the relevance rate for master's programs (67%) was slightly higher than for bachelor's programs (65%) (Helyer, 2011).

The results were gathered into a systematic evaluation of HZU's syllabuses, yielding a suitability score of 65%. The results suggest that thoughtful adjustments to the curricula could enhance compatibility by as much as 10%. Advocating for interdisciplinary approaches and stronger collaborations between HEIs and labor market stakeholders.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN KOSOVO

Due to the significant development of higher education over the past 15 years, higher education in Kosovo is evenly split between public and private institutions. The accreditation process for public and private higher education institutions is overseen by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA). Both institutions fall under the purview of the Higher Education Act. Private schools and certain universities may be eligible and approved under applicable law. The differences between government-funded universities and their private counterparts lie in structural setup, accreditation, funding, and institutional setup (Beha, Bellaqa, & Shala, 2024). Also, private institutions are banned from offering teaching qualification programs. The table below presents detailed data on student enrollment across NQF levels 5, 6, 7, and 8 in public and private HEIs (Erasmus Plus, 2020).

Table 1. *Registration based on NQF levels in the academic year 2020/2021.*

NQF	Public HEI in Albanian and other languages	Private HEI	Total	% as per level
Level 5	0	44	44	**0.2**
Level 6	9,566	11,894	21,460	**79.8**
Level 7	3,129	2,260	5,389	**20.0**
Level 8	3	0	3	**0.0**
Total no	**12,698**	**14,198**	**26,896**	100

Source: *Overview of the Higher Education System in the EU / Erasmus Project, 2022.*

For levels 5 and 6 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the distribution of students is higher in private HEIs, while for levels 7 and 8, the distribution is higher in public HEIs. It is important to note that no students are registered for level 5 in public HEIs in the Albanian language, and no students are registered for level 8 in private HEIs (MESTI, 2022). According to the data presented, in the 2020/2021 academic year, 26,896 students were registered for higher education studies. Of these, 12,698 are in public HEIs, respectively, and 14,198 are in private HEIs. According to MESTI, the largest number of students enrolled is in Business Studies and Management Sciences (19.41%), followed by Medical Sciences (17.82%) and Law (10.50%). Of all the fields of study, medical sciences in private HEIs dominate, enrolling almost 10 times more students than public HEIs in this field of study. The following table displays the relevant student registrations by field of research and ISCED 2011 codes (International Standard Classification of Education) (MESTI, 2022).

Table 2. *Enrollment of students based on NQF levels in the academic year 2020/2021 in HEIs.*

Code	Field of study according to Erasmus	Public HEI (Albanian and other languages)	Public HEI in Serbian	Private HEI	Total	%
01	Agricultural sciences	404	107	226	737	2.43
02	Architecture, Urban and Regional Planning	323	162	1058	1543	5.10
03	Arts and Design	288	88	784	1160	3.83
04	Business Studies and Management Sciences	2116	461	3297	5874	19.41
05	Education and training for pedagogues	1029	274	0	1303	4.30
06	Engineering, Technology	941	377	1674	2992	9.88
07	Geography, Geology	169	261	0	430	1.42
08	Human sciences	333	67	0	400	1.32
09	Philological and linguistic science	547	167	867	1581	5.22
010	Law / Legal	1170	203	1806	3179	10.50
011	Mathematics, Informatics	207	186	865	1258	4.16

012	Medical sciences	545	153	4696	5394	17.82
013	Natural sciences	241	116	0	357	1.18
014	Social sciences	830	185	1691	2706	8.94
015	Communication and Informatics Sciences	180	62	258	500	1.65
016	Physical Education, Sports Science	248	192	415	855	2.82
	Total/ All Subject Areas	9571	3061	17637	30269	100.00

Source: *Overview of the Higher Education System in the EU / Erasmus Project, 2022.*

SIMILARITY OF THE HEIS STUDY PROGRAMS

The following data provides an overview of accredited public and private HEIs in Kosovo, categorized by their academic units. Since HZU comprises five academic units, the table focuses exclusively on academic units or faculties from other HEIs that align with those at HZU. This method lets people directly compare colleges that group their courses into similar departments. It is worth noting that a few privately owned colleges do not organize themselves into traditional departments. In those cases, annotations are provided based on the fields of study their programs cover (Mazelliu & Zogjani, 2015). The table includes only HEIs offering programs similar to HZU's, particularly those considered to have a competitive influence on HZU's offerings.

Table 3. *Comparison of the HZU with HEIs based on academic units.*

	Faculty of Business / Economics / Management	Faculty of Management in Tourism & Hospitality & Education	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Agribusiness	Faculty of Arts – Music Department
1	**UNIVERSITY OF PRISHTINA**				
	Economics	X	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Agriculture	Faculty of Arts – Music Department
2	**UNIVERSITY "UKSHIN HOTI"**				
	Economics	X	Faculty of Law	X	X
3	**UNIVERSITY "ISA BOLETINI**				

	Economics	X	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Food Tech-nology	X
4	**UNIVERSITY "KADRI ZEKA"**				
	Economics	X	Faculty of Law	X	X
5	**UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES**				
	Management	Tourism and Environment	X	X	Faculty of Applied Arts
6	**UNIVERSITY "FEHMI AGANI"**				
	X	X	X	X	X
6	**COLLEGE AAB**				
	Economics	X	Faculty of Law	X	Faculty of Arts
7	**COLLEGE UBT**				
	Management, Business, and Economics	X	Faculty of Law	Faculty of Agriculture	Faculty of Arts
7.1.	The campus in Prizren offers all programs tailored to students' interests and needs.				

Source: *Strategic Plan 2023-2026 of HZU* (Haxhi Zeka University, 2023).

ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS

Haxhi Zeka University offers 17 accredited programs among five schools. Other institutions, including universities, junior colleges, and vocational training programs, have similar programs in the Dukagjini region, especially in Peja, Gjakova, and Prizren, which contribute to competition for HZU. The University of Pristina is also recognized as a leading university in Kosovo and is considered the most established institution in the country (Cocaj, 2022). Therefore, the programs of HZU are compared to the University of Pristina and other competing universities located in the Dukagjini region.

The analysis of the data presented reveals the following highlights:

– Programs with no Competition: Four accredited HZU programs face no competition from the compared higher education institutions (HEIs). These programs include Human Resource Management, Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment, Management in Tourism (in Bosnian), and Performing Arts Education. This lack of competition is attributed to the uniqueness of the program names rather than their content.

– Programs in Bosnian: Programs offered in the Bosnian language have only one competitor, the "Ukshin Hoti" University in Prizren.

- Programs with Minimal Competition (1-2 Competitors): These include Food Technology, Plant Production Technology, Sustainable Food Production Systems, Environmental Management, and Music Education (BA and MA).
- Programs with Moderate Competition (3-4 Competitors): Programs such as Informatics in Business, Agri-Environment and Agri-Ecology, International and European Law, and Business Management (MA) fall into this category.
- Programs with High Competition (5+ Competitors): The Business Management program at the bachelor level experiences the highest level of competition, with 7 out of the eight compared universities offering a similar or identical program.
- Programs with high competition (5 or more): The Business Management program at the bachelor's level has the highest intensity of competition, as seven of the eight analyzed universities have identical or comparable programs.

ASSESSING THE RELEVANCE OF HZU STUDY PROGRAMS ABOUT LABOR MARKET REQUIREMENTS

New tools enable universities to better match their courses with the jobs people can obtain, thereby improving accuracy and building confidence (Behluli, Qerimi, Pula, & Shabani, 2022). Therefore, we gathered specific data about job opportunities in Kosovo for this study. This data includes various fields (mentioned in methodology) plus other areas related to what HZU provides. Data was obtained from the official online job competition announcements in Kosovo at https://portalpune.com (Januzaj, Beqiri, & Luma, 2022).

Using data content from both the labor market data and HZU's programs, a percentage of alignment was calculated for each study program to evaluate its compatibility with market requirements. We began by tidying up the information, removing duplicates, unusual symbols, and irrelevant content. Then, we changed the clean information into numbers so computers could work with it. It is essential to understand the skills required when creating courses, so students acquire the skills that people need today. People used to do this work by hand. Our research presents a new, automated method for assessing the alignment between job needs in Kosovo and the courses HZU provides.
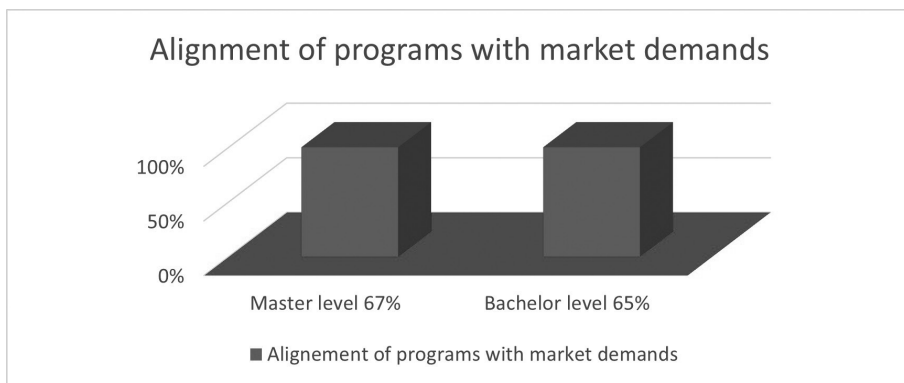
AUTOMATED MODEL SYSTEM

The automated model ensures accuracy and consistency by linking market needs with HZU's programs. To achieve this, data on the Kosovo labor market, including economics, technology, education, business administration, and other fields relevant to HZU's educational programs, were collected. The data on the labor market and HZU's study programs were analyzed to determine the degree of fit expressed as a percentage of fit. The principle here is the use of advanced algorithms, including data cleaning and numerical transformation processes (Januzaj et al., 2024). The system measures the proficiency of HZU's courses in equipping students with the skills required in the job market and provides feedback needed to improve teaching (HZU, 2023). This automated method enables a systematic and reliable assessment of HZU's program fit with the labor market, allowing the university to take necessary measures (Teshome & Oumer, 2024).

To develop a comprehensive picture of the HZU program, we integrated the results of individual academic programs and faculties, which provides insight into how university programs are adapting to changing market needs. We move step by step, starting with the examination of individual programs, then reviewing academic units, and finally evaluating the entire university. This process helps us truly grasp how well our classes prepare students for jobs. The sections below demonstrate the thoroughness of these evaluations, providing a clear picture of how well the university's courses prepare students for available jobs.

STUDY PROGRAMS vs LABOR MARKET

The figure below presents a comparison of university courses at the master's degree level and the educational requirements of the labor market. It demonstrates that the Master's program is most compatible with a connection of 67%. At the same time, the relevance of Bachelor's degree courses is shown to be 65%, which is less than half of the total. The findings reveal a significant discrepancy between the skills taught in schools at various levels and those required in the workplace.
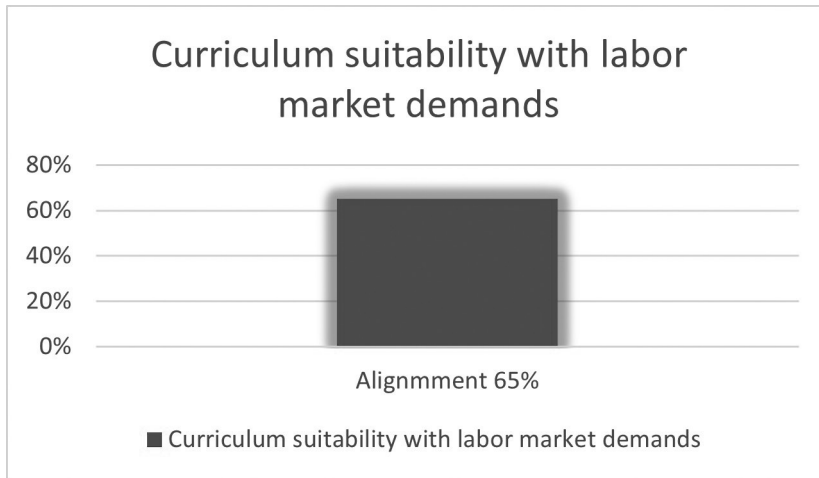
Figure 2. *Comparison of Master's and Bachelor's Programs*.

ALIGNMENT OF COURSES WITH LABOR MARKET NEEDS

A central aspect of this research is aligning university curricula with the needs of professionals. We investigate the extent to which classroom learning prepares students to acquire skills that promote employability in the labor market. To this end, we reviewed all relevant literature and cited the conclusion of Januzaj et al. (2022), which states that HZU courses currently meet students' needs in 65% of cases.

Analysis of course content, combined with a systematic study of quality indicators, allowed us to identify content that deserves special attention for "targeted updates." If implemented, these revisions are expected to improve the program as a whole and increase overall quality in terms of effectiveness and relevance by approximately 10%. This is consistent with Dzogovic's (2023a) position that curricular development is a continuous process that adapts to changes in society and the labor market, thereby ensuring its relevance and alignment with academic practice in the workplace. Dzogovic (2023b) argues that the strategic management of culturally and ethnically diverse resources is essential for their utilization in societal development (pp. 151–166). In the context of higher education, we apply this principle to justify the integration of cultural and ethnic diversity into the design of effective teaching and learning programs that prepare students for evolving societal expectations and the demands of professional communities in the labor market.

Figure 3. *Suitability index for the university curriculum.*

CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions in Kosovo (both public and private) offer a high degree of uniformity in their programs, resulting in insufficient curricular differentiation to accommodate the diverse institutional, socio-demographic, and economic contexts of the various regions in which they operate. This lack of diversity and uniformity across programs leads to serious problems, including a lack of engagement in scientific research, underutilization of innovative technologies and pedagogies, and inadequate alignment of academic programs with the changing skill demands of the labor market, particularly in internships and apprenticeships (HZU, 2023). A thorough review of HZU's internship program showed that while it provided valuable practical experience, its delivery and implementation only partially aligned with the competencies required by industry stakeholders. The alignment rate was 67% for master's programs and 65% for bachelor's programs, with a cumulative curriculum alignment index of 65%. This indicates considerable room for improvement. However, the application of advanced, automated analytics holds great potential for improving the accuracy of curriculum evaluation and facilitating evidence-based program change (Januzaj et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the results illustrate how adapting internship programs to labor market needs can increase productivity by more than 10%. This underscores the need for continuous revisions of educational programs, particularly the need for close, collaborative relationships with companies. Given limited financial resources and fewer teaching staff, the HZU strategic plan

nevertheless addresses these concerns clearly and with vision. In particular, the planned vocational training programs based on Level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework will help strengthen the bridge between secondary and tertiary education, promote entrepreneurial skills, and help graduates develop competencies directly tailored to today's world of work (Kosovo Accreditation Agency [KAA], 2020). Therefore, higher education institutions in the Republic of Kosovo must focus on developing innovative, market-oriented curricula, coupled with solid, evidence-based feedback systems and integration with industry, to prepare graduates for a proactive, fast-paced, and competitive professional environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A study on the current state of higher education in Kosovo suggests that reforms are needed to improve the quality of education and its relevance in the labor market. A lack of diverse educational opportunities and low competition in the labor market make it difficult for graduates to find employment. To address this limitation, we propose the following recommendations:

Diversification of the curriculum: Higher education institutions should design programs that meet the specific resources and needs of their local communities. Adopting interdisciplinary approaches can enrich and enhance the meaning of educational content.

Strengthen collaboration with industry: Building strong relationships with employers and industry is critical. This cooperation fosters the development of educational programs that address labor market needs and provide pathways to vocational and professional training.

Vocational Program Development: Promoting entrepreneurship by developing entrepreneurship programs based on the resources and specific needs of the local community. These programs must meet market needs and employer expectations.

Continuous Curriculum Improvement: Updating courses based on feedback from students, alumni, and employers enables students to acquire the skills they need for their future careers.

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TRANSFORMACIJA KURIKULUMA I AKADEMSKE STRATEGIJE U VISOKOM OBRAZOVANJU: STUDIJA SLUČAJA SOCIOEKONOMSKOG UTJECAJA

Visokoškolski sistem na Kosovu trenutno se suočava s nekoliko složenih izazova, uključujući stalan pad broja upisanih studenata, poteškoće diplomanata u pronalaženju zaposlenja i potrebu prilagodbe obrazovnih programa zahtjevima modernog tržišta rada. Cilj ove studije je sistematski procijeniti relevantnost akademskog pristupa na Univerzitetu Haxhi Zeka (HZU) i njegovim dodiplomskim programima korištenjem naprednih automatiziranih alata za komparativnu analizu temeljenih na podacima iz oglasa za posao.

Analiza otkriva da programi, posebno u STEM područjima, često nisu u potpunosti usklađeni sa stručnim zahtjevima i potrebama poslodavaca. Ova neusklađenost prvenstveno je posljedica strukturnih ograničenja unutar nastavnih planova i programa i nastavnih praksi. Iako neki programi do određene mjere zadovoljavaju zahtjeve tržišta rada, ukupna raznolikost i relevantnost dostupne obuke ostaju ograničene. Studija naglašava potrebu institucionalizacije metoda poučavanja usmjerenih na praksu, revizije programa svake tri do pet godina i jačanja saradnje između univerziteta i privatnog sektora. Implementacija automatiziranih sistema može pomoći u tačnom prepoznavanju nedostataka između vještina koje se podučavaju i onih koje su stvarno potrebne. Ovaj pristup ima potencijal poboljšati zapošljivost diplomanata, doprinijeti regionalnom socioekonomskom razvoju i znatno poboljšati prilagodljivost visokoškolskih ustanova promjenjivim zahtjevima tržišta rada.

Ključne riječi: akademska strategija, relevantnost kurikuluma, izazovi zapošljavanja, socioekonomsko okruženje, Univerzitet Haxhi Zeka