



Remarkable progress of quality assurance in Kosovo and challenges ahead

A takeaway from the KAA 2023 International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Collected and written by Klemen Miklavič, Aqim Emurli and Arta Basha-Jakupi

Pristina, 26.09.2023

1. Introduction

Kosovo is a sui generis European young country. The surveys and general atmosphere among its population clearly shows the affinity for European values and norms. A strong European identity makes the inhabitants and society of Kosovo among the most pro EU oriented communities in the whole Europe. Hence, there is strong legitimacy for adopting European normative solutions in all sectors, including higher education. Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is one of the strongest policy mechanisms that came into the national legislations via the international initiatives within the Bologna process. Kosovo is no exception in this, even though not a member country yet.

During a well-attended conference on QA (cca 180 participants) a very topical discussion on the present and the future of higher education and its quality unfolded with the participation and input of prominent international and domestic guests, including the Prime Minister and the Minister (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation), high representatives of the European institutions for quality in higher education (lead by the President of EQAR, former Director of EQAR and Vice-President of ENQA), rectors and senior management staff from higher education institutions, ambassadors to Republic of Kosovo, members of Assembly of Kosovo, academic staff, representatives of international organisations, donors, international experts and evaluators and guests from the neighbouring countries. The conference was divided into five sections: The introductory section was dedicated to the institutional speeches by high representatives of state and distinctive guests, followed by the reflection on KAA development and eventually by three thematic panels looking at the QA in higher education from international, regional perspectives and the view of stakeholders¹.

2. Education as a constitutive institution of the society in Kosovo

The keynote speaker, the prime minister Mr. Albin Kurti reminded how central the University of Pristina has been and still is for the statehood of Kosovo. As the key institution of society it generated the intellectual elite and allowed for the social emancipation process during the crucial years in the history. The emancipatory role of higher education has continued also after independence. The central social and cultural role of universities is not unique to Kosovo. Higher Education has played a key role for the construction of European civilization. Mr. Stephan Lauwick, the president of EQAR added his international perspective to the larger meaning of higher education: He spoke about values and culture. The role of QA is central in fostering the meaningful higher education for the region.

¹ This article is intended as a reflection on the content and discussion of the conference, therefore it does not follow the structure of the conference.

In her inaugural speech, Ms. Hasnije Iliazi, the president of the KAA Board (State Council on Quality) saw higher education as a constitutive institution for building the society and the state. The creation of the society and state requires a high quality of higher education, hence the quality assurance is the key institution for the independent and sovereign state of Kosovo.

However, times are changing and the challenges for Kosovo are ever more of an economic nature. Minister Arberie Nagevci saw the importance of appropriate regulatory mechanisms in higher education. The sector saw a rapid transformation in the recent past. Quality assurance is an essential process in such a dynamic sector and it is crucial in preparing the outstandingly large youth population for the society and the labour market.

3. International perspective

The guiding role of the European organisations

The international level actors in the field of QA in higher education have an enormous influence on the development of QA systems in higher education in the Western Balkans. This is a huge responsibility for the future of the region. European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) represent a powerful driver of change and development of QA procedures and practices as witnessed in detail by Sandra Bezjak and Franci Demšar, respective directors of Croatian and Slovene QA agencies. The awareness of their role was expressed also by the international guests from EQAR and ENQA. In both cases the assistance and guidance will be of high value, and among other issues, was mentioned that the quality assurance in higher education is of utmost importance, ensuring that students receive a high-quality education that meets industry and societal needs, as well as ensures that study programs and services provided by HEIs meet established standards, are consistent, and are constantly improving - promoting accountability, transparency and educational excellence at all levels (teaching, research & social mission). Being part of European fora on educational matters encourages the domestic modernisation processes and more.

However, in the particular case of Kosovo, the membership of international structures can be subdued to external political forces. It remains to be seen whether the international organisations that were created with the purpose of strengthening cooperation and Europeanisation of higher education will prioritise the development of quality higher education over the political and strategic power play between the regional states and their global allies.

On the other hand, Kosovo has made serious steps forward in terms of meeting the expectation of the European higher education community. According to Ms. Nagevci this is especially visible in terms of abiding to the ESG and granting independence to the agency. These are likely the most outstanding aspects for a QA agency in order to qualify as a trustworthy by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The progress was noticed also by international guests, among whom His Excellency Mr. Georg Schnitzer, the ambassador of Austria to Kosovo.

4. Domestic perspective

Independence of Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA)

On the domestic level, the work should continue with the formidable pace of recent years. The independence of the KAA has been at the centre of the public debate. The loss of the membership status of ENQA and deregistration from EQAR have had a strong echo in the society and governing structures of a country that is determined to become a full member of European integration. Independence relies on more basic conditions. Mr. Kurti mentioned three crucial ones: (first) the institutional independence which is granted by the newly adopted law for the KAA through appropriate governance, organisational

structures and procedures, (second) financial independence and sometimes overlooked (third) precondition - the agency's professional capacity. The KAA director Naim Gashi confirmed that the resources allocated enable the staff to increase from 11 to 17 by the end of the year. It is essential that this trend will continue in the following years and that the new premises will allow for the continuation of the substantial progress of KAA.

Higher education for inclusive society and dialogue

The three priorities ahead of the quality assurance policy in Kosovo according to Ms Iliazi are a) the internationalisation of higher education and the implementation of the pertaining standards; b) dialogue between all social groups and c) regional cooperation for the implementation of ESG and recognition of qualifications and thus enhancing the mobility of students and free movement of youth. Prioritising higher education means addressing the relatively high proportion of youth that will shape the future of the country. These words were complemented by Mr. Enis Kervan, member of the Kosovo Assembly who brought into the discussion the especially colourful Kosovar society with many communities residing in it. Policies should be inclusive of all these communities in order to make the youth participate in the construction of a prosperous society.

Enhancing transparency, accountability and integrity

Mr. Milan Pol, an experienced evaluation expert for the higher education institutions and programs in Kosovo reported a notable improvement of higher education in general. He underlined an enormous enthusiasm of the academic staff and especially the KAA staff in bringing forward the enhancement of the transparency and integrity of the KAA procedures is also one of the priorities. Mr. Gashi gave the example of the permanent presence of the civil society at the decision making meetings as one of the major steps in advancing the standards of transparency, accountability and public access to the process of QA in higher education.

There are also challenges of integrity in higher education that extend beyond the reach of KAA. To a large extent they arise from the expansion of the sector and the fast growth in enrolment numbers. Hence the need for tighter rules about academic integrity especially in research and PhD qualifications. A welcome ambition proposed by Minister Nagevci is to have all the PhD theses published and publicly available.

5. Challenges ahead

Kosovo as part of EHEA

The discussion brought up some obvious challenges that will keep the Kosovar higher education community and the government busy in the years to come. The main priority remains the effort to recognise KAA as a member of ENQA and make its way to the EQAR. The underlying master goal is to make Kosovo become a full member of the EHEA and the Bologna process. From the inputs and discussion, it was clear that Kosovo is perhaps better prepared than many full members of EHEA, but there is the looming political situation that creates obstacles to the so much needed sit at the table of the European higher education community.

Regional cooperation in QA and Recognition of Qualification

The issue of uneven levels of QA development in the region becomes ever more salient. This was noticed also by Mr. Lauwick from his European perspective. Graduates from the higher education institutions of the neighbouring countries seek jobs and continuation of studies in Kosovo. Some Kosovar higher education institutions employ PhD graduates from the region as their teaching staff. This practice suggests a need for tighter cooperation in both QA and recognition of qualifications in

order to avoid mistrust or even potential abuses. Ms Kumrije Gagica from NARIC Kosovo presented a welcome Western Balkans regional agreement on the recognition of higher education qualifications. For the time being it is limited to the public sector which excludes a large proportion of higher education institutions. There is much to do in order to ultimately bring coherence and trust in the quality of higher education in the Western Balkans. A lasting peace is built also with the “bridges” that young people create during their study period, therefore youth should have opportunity for study mobility and fair recognition of their achievements.

Stakeholders in QA of higher education

One of the next stages of the development of QA of Kosovar higher education will be the involvement of the main stakeholders. To some extent the students have already been involved, however with the new KAA law the organised representation of students will have a vote in the SCQ, thus a greater role in the decisions on accreditation. In one of the panels also the representative from the ranks of employers demonstrated that they can be articulated regarding higher education and thereby contributing to the QA process. Stakeholder involvement in shaping modern European higher education has been very important in the Bologna process. This was also extensively elaborated in the presentation of Ms. Kristina Ghitulica, vice president of ENQA. She reminded that ESG were generated by the representative organisations of stakeholders. Eventually Mr. Colin Tück, former Director of EQAR presented to the conference an overview of the involvement and achievements of stakeholders in higher education.

Speakers at the conference (in order of appearance):

Mrs. Hasnije Ilazi, President of the Board of KAA;
Mr. Albin Kurti, Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo;
Mrs. Arbërie Nagavci, Minister, MESTI;
Mr. Enis Kervan, member of the Assembly of Kosovo, Committee on education;
Mr. Georg Schnetzer, His Excellency Austrian Ambassador to Kosovo;
Mr. Naim Gashi, General Director of KAA;
Mr. Milan Pol, Masaryk University Czech Republic, evaluation expert of KAA;
Mr. Stephane Lauwick, EQAR, President;
Ms. Kristina Ghitulica, ENQA, Vice President;
Mr. Iring Wasser, CEO of ASIIN (Germany);
Mr. Franci Demsar, SQAA (Slovenia), Director;
Ms. Sandra Bežjak, AZVAO (Croatia);
Ms. Kumrije Gagica, Director of NARIC Kosovo;
Mr. Qerim Qerimi, University of Prishtina, Rector;
Ms. Diellza Ibrahim, Student Union of AAB College;
Mr. Mergim Cahani, Gjarafa, CEO;
Mr. Colin Tück, Director of EQAR until 2023.

Moderators and General Rapporteur of the conference

Aqim Emurli (Moderator of panel 1 on international perspective)
Klemen Miklavčič (Moderator of panel 2 on regional perspective and General Rapporteur of the conference)
Arta Basha - Jakupi (Moderator of panel 3 on stakeholders' perspective)