

KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT – ALBANIA 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the subject of education and training, Albania has dedicated the best part of 2022 to weathering the consecutive crisis of the 2019 earthquake, the 2020 pandemic and ongoing energy crisis linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This comes in the context of an underfunded education system with declining participation. All these issues affect education in different manners (infrastructure, digitalisation, labour market, inclusion, VET) and have required both adaptations of the National Employment and Skills Strategy, which is in its final year of implementation, and consideration in the development of its follow-up Strategy. A number of key achievements were made possible in 2022, including the finalisation of the legal framework linked to the new overarching law on VET (all by-laws have now been drafted, only two remain to be approved), further strengthening of the key institutions as well as numerous EU level commitments. For example, the Albanian referencing report to European Qualification Framework (EQF) was approved making it possible for Albanian learners and professionals to easily compare their qualifications with the rest of the EU, an important milestone in the country's skilling system development. A Sector Skill Council was established for the ICT sector and initial related activities were launched; this is a key development in a context where private sector engagement for skills development was lagging. Much remains to be done to substantially promote adult learning and the new Strategy for skills and employment (to cover the next 5 years) emphasises the need to harness non-state actors in reaching out and delivering skills. On the subject of employment, Albania has not returned to its pre-COVID employment situation, but has nonetheless improved on key indicators which had suffered a decline due to lockdowns and sluggish employment growth. For example, although still very high, the NEET rates have declined modestly over 7 consecutive years. This is an indication that the country is gradually gaining control over youth inactivity. Moreover, both the employment rate and the average income have increased slightly. The platform economy is also growing quickly, with thousands of young Albanians obtaining income through international task-based assignments on Freelancer.com and other similar sites. Recent developments have included the continued strengthening of the Public Employment Services (service guidelines, relevant training, etc.) and the expansion as well as the diversification of Active Labour Market Measures to specifically address the needs of hard-to-reach vulnerable groups and support apprenticeships.

1. KEY POLITICAL, DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Political developments

The incumbent Prime Minister, Edi Rama, won the parliamentary elections in April 2021 for the third consecutive time. He is likely to remain the head of government until 2025.

Recovery from the November 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic while sustaining the pace of reforms has been the main focus of the Albanian government. The country was granted official candidate status for accession to the EU in 2014, and accession talks were initiated in March 2020. The first intergovernmental conference took place in July 2022. No less than 89% of Albanians believe that EU membership is a positive development, and 85% think that their government should do more for relations with the EU (consistently the highest figure in the region) (RCC, 2022).

Demographics

The number of births in Albania barely compensates for the compounded mortality and migration rates. The population is rapidly ageing, and its growth rate has been fluctuating around zero for the past two decades. In 2021, 2 811 700 inhabitants were estimated to live in Albania, representing a decrease of around 1% as compared to the previous year (INSTAT 2022).

Most areas in Albania are facing severe depopulation, while Tirana is experiencing large-scale urbanisation (Betti et al, 2018; INSTAT, 2022). Two-thirds of the population reside in urban centres. Tirana (the capital) is by far the largest city, with some 375 000 inhabitants. Just over 20% of Albania's citizens are within the youth category (aged 15-24) (INSTAT, 2022). The old dependency ratio (number of persons above the working age (65+) over the number of persons of working age (15 to 64)) stood at 22.3% in 2021 (Jorgoni et al, 2021).

Albania experiences a very high level of emigration, ranking it among the top countries in the world as a percentage of the current population. Although the trend temporarily decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, recent history has seen groups from all social-economic backgrounds and levels of education emigrating from Albania. These brain-drain outflows have been on the rise in the past decades. Those in their twenties who are the best-educated and most qualified are mostly emigrating to EU and North American countries (ETF, 2021a).

The education system has contributed to emigration. Its comparatively low quality encourages many individuals to emigrate, with the aim of obtaining a better education for themselves or their children. Thus, the number of Albanian students studying abroad is high, placing Albania in the lead among the Western Balkan countries. The ETF also observes that very few of them wish to return to Albania (ETF, 2021).

For the academic year 2021/2022, 577 869 pupils and students were enrolled in formal education, representing a decrease of 2.0% compared to the previous year, and of 12% compared to the school year 2017/2018. This decrease in participation affects all education levels and has repercussions for institutional and staff planning in education (INSTAT, 2022).

Key economic developments

The energy and food crisis on European markets, as a consequence of Russia's war on Ukraine, have put additional pressure on the Albanian economy, which is dominated by micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees. In 2020, SMEs represented 99.8% of all enterprises and employed 81.9% of the working population in Albania. These small enterprises, mostly operating in trade, accommodation or food services, were hit the most during the pandemic. Global lockdowns also caused significant losses for sectors like manufacturing and tourism. Nevertheless, throughout 2020 and 2021, fast and determined responses from the government and the central bank managed to soften the negative

impacts of the pandemic and helped maintain the macroeconomic and financial sector stability (OECD, 2022).

Albania's GDP grew by 8.3% in 2021, which can be attributed to increases in both domestic and foreign demand. This economic recovery was fuelled by a rise in exports of goods and services, which exceeded their pre-crisis level and increased by 36% compared to 2020, driven by a strong recovery in tourism and a steady rally in goods exports.

The GDP contribution across economic sectors is stable, with services representing 48.4% of GDP in 2020 and industry, including construction, representing 20.2%. Although the share of agriculture has declined for over a decade, it remains a key sector in Albania, particularly when compared to its neighbours, representing 19.1% of GDP (INSTAT, 2022). The agricultural and services sectors have the highest share of total employment in the economy, representing together almost 80% of the working population in 2020. They are also the fastest-growing sectors (INSTAT, 2022).

Medina and Schneider (2018) calculated the undeclared economy in Albania as likely to comprise 32.7% of its GDP. A survey (Williams, 2020) found that 44.7% of businesses claimed to be competing with unregistered or informal businesses. Another study found the share of people working in the informal sector to be comparatively high, accounting for 56.7% of total employment. The sectors most represented in the informal economy are agriculture (63.9%), wholesale & retail trade (12.6%) and construction (7.6%) (ILO 2020).

Remittances sent to Albania in 2020 (USD 1.4 billion) represented 9.9% of its GDP, a figure that has remained around 10% for multiple consecutive years, including 2021 and 2022 (World Bank, 2022).

Key social issues

Data published by Eurostat show that 51% of Albania's citizens are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which is the highest share in Europe. In 2019, the percentage of Albanians perceived as being at risk of poverty was almost twice as high as the EU average (21.1%).

According to World Bank estimates, the current poverty rate is 23.4%, representing a continuous improvement from previous years (World Bank, 2022). Poverty particularly affects the unemployed, low-skilled people, people in rural areas, vulnerable women, people with disabilities and Roma and Egyptian minorities. According to INSTAT, in 2022, almost 42% of Albanians' income was spent on food, 10% on housing, energy and water, and 7% on furniture and clothing.

2. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1 Trends and challenges

Starting out as one of the lowest performers in the Western Balkans, Albania has over the last 20 years become one of the fastest improvers, achieving significant gains in access to education and in raising learning outcomes.

During this period, the mean number of years of schooling increased by 2.3 and the expected number of years of schooling increased by 3.1. Albania's Human Development Index for 2021 was 0.796, placing the country in the high human development category, in 67th position out of 191 countries. However, it remains the second lowest in Europe after Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, Albania moves up to 50th position when its Human Development Index is adjusted for inequality (UNDP, 2022).

Key progress includes establishing a policy framework for preschool education. Furthermore, over the last 4 years, Albania has taken institutional measures and restructured key agencies responsible for school support and external evaluation, aiming to further deconcentrate governance mechanisms and improve service delivery. For example, the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency (referred to as ASCAL), was derived from the reorganisation of the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (PAAHE). ASCAL is the only institution operating in the higher education sector that monitors and evaluates the quality of higher education.

Recent developments also include the gradual introduction of competency-based curricula for the different subjects and grades of basic education, the establishment of teacher training standards and the use of a school evaluation indicator framework.

Education strategy and legal framework for education

Recent measures have included the drafting of the new National Strategy of Education and Action Plan 2021- 2026, covering pre-school to higher education, curricular adaptations and legislative frameworks, as well as free textbooks to primary level pupils (it does not cover VET). The part dedicated to higher education includes objectives related to internationalisation of higher education; quality improvements in the assessment framework regarding higher education programmes; improvements in research infrastructure, ICT infrastructure and services for public higher education institutions.

Both initial and continuing VET, as well as adult learning are covered under the National Employment and Skills Strategy (see below).

Education expenditure

Government expenditure on education amounted to 3.95% of GDP in 2020, which corresponds to 12.1% of total government expenditure (World Bank World Development Indicators, last available year).

Access, participation and early school leaving

In the 2021/2022 academic year, a total of 577 869 pupils and students attended formal education, a decrease from 2020/2021, when 589 604 were enrolled. The decrease in participation is noted at all education levels. For example, this included 72 384 children enrolled in kindergartens, a figure that is subject to a decreasing trend over the last 5 years.

Albania maintains high access to primary education, with a net enrolment rate of 96% in 2020. However, Roma children and children with disabilities do not benefit equally (Maghnouj et al, 2020). The Human Development Report states that Albanian children who started schooling in 2019 may expect to receive 14.7 years of schooling (UNDP, 2022).

Net enrolment in secondary education (level 2 and 3 ISCED) stood at 87.1% in 2021, while the share of VET students (ISCED level 3) stood at 17.6% (INSTAT, 2022). This implies that just under 20 000 students were enrolled in vocational education programmes at secondary level, which illustrates the comparatively small proportion of VET students. Initial vocational education programmes are currently offered in 34 vocational schools, some of them of a very small size and with only a few profiles and students, and 10 vocational training centres. Albania's vocational education system is comparatively small and attracts very few women.

Regarding Lifelong Learning, the participation of adults is still marginal. The Adult Education Survey 2017 shows that only 9.2% of the population aged 25-64, have participated in formal and non-formal education and training (9.5% of females; 8.8% of males), (INSTAT, 2018). Based on LFS data, adult learning remains well below the EU average, with fewer than 1% of adults having taken part in education and training 4 weeks prior to the survey (LFS, 2019).

PISA results

Despite sustained improvements since 2009, Albanian students continue to perform poorly in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. In the last edition, in 2018, 50.3% of 15-year-olds performed poorly in reading and 53.3% performed poorly in mathematics. Albania has a higher proportion (29.7%, OECD average: 13.4%) of students who are unable to demonstrate basic proficiency (Level 2) in all three core domains of PISA (OECD, 2020). These results illustrate that education quality remains a challenge for the country. This is particularly true for schools in rural, mountainous and isolated areas, which struggle to attract well-qualified teachers.

Young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)

Despite long-term underinvestment in education and training, the last decade has witnessed significant improvements. Early school leaving halved from 31.9% in 2010 to 16.3% in 2019, and the low educational attainment rate fell from 51.6% in 2010 to 42.6% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). Similarly, by the end of 2021, the share of NEETs in the 15-29 age group had dropped significantly to 26.1%, compared to 2015 (32.8%) and 2020 (27.9%).

No fewer than 60% of Albanian NEETs are in the younger age group (15-24), whereas the distribution by gender is equal. However, in the 25-29 age group, 60% of NEETs are inactive women.

Increasing levels of educational attainment do not fully insulate youth from labour market challenges. In 2021, the share of NEETs among 15-29-year-olds was highest among tertiary school graduates (32.9%), followed by those with primary (28.4%) and secondary (24.0%) levels of educational attainment. Among young people with secondary education, the data show that the NEET rate is much higher for those who have completed general education (32.4%), as compared to those who have completed vocational education and training (VET) (24.6%).

One issue that will complicate the implementation of the EU Youth Guarantee scheme is the fact that only 10% of young NEETs aged 15-29 (18 142 out of 175 209) were registered as jobseekers in the third quarter of 2021.

2.2 Initial VET and adult learning

Strategic and legal framework for initial VET and adult learning

The National Employment and Skills Strategy 2014-2022 (NESS) has been the main strategic framework for skills development, the employment service and active labour market policies (ALMPs). It is fully aligned with the relevant EU strategies. The overarching goal of the NESS is to promote quality jobs and skills opportunities for all Albanian citizens throughout their lives. It has four strategic priorities: (i) foster decent job opportunities through effective labour market policies, (ii) offer quality VET to youth and adults, (iii) promote social inclusion and territorial cohesion, and (iv) strengthen the governance of the labour market and qualification systems.

Annual assessments have highlighted the achievements and challenges encountered. Reforms included the continuous development of the AQF and individual qualifications; the revision of framework curricula for VET; the organisation of basic pedagogical training for all VET teachers and instructors; and the development of flexible VET and job offers (including school- and work-based VET and ALMPs). Most of the milestones have been achieved on time, particularly the consolidation of the institutional framework in the employment and skills development sector (Ministry of Finance and Economy - MoFE, 2021).

For example, the by-laws for the implementation of the VET Law have been approved almost completely. A Decision of the Council of Ministers on the opening, closing and reorganisation of public VET providers has been drafted to seek other institutions' opinions. Guidelines on income generation and expenditure by public VET providers have also been drawn up. The draft has been sent for opinions and comments to the relevant structures of the MFE and will soon be sent for signature by the Minister.

The MoFE has started work on the development of the new NESS 2023-2030. A Ministerial Order was used to establish a working group on this topic. The formal submission of the new strategy to the Council of Ministers took place in November 2022 and is expected to focus on private sector engagement in both VET and ALMPs.

Furthermore, Albania is committed to implementing the objectives of the EU Council Recommendation on VET of November 2020 and of the Osnabruck Declaration. Albania's integrated monitoring will be guided by its National Implementation Plan, involving both the DGVT and the ACVT. Additionally, the country has endorsed the Western Balkans Declaration on ensuring the sustainable labour market integration of young people and is committed to gradually establishing and implementing the EU Youth Guarantee scheme.

As post-secondary VET programmes are offered by higher education institutions and VET institutions, their governance is regulated by several laws and by-laws such as the Higher Education Law (2015), the Vocational Education and Training Law (2017), and the AQF Law (2010, amended in 2018), and corresponding secondary legislation. With regard to the law on VET, out of the 27 planned by-laws, 15 had already been adopted by the end of 2022.

VET governance and financing arrangements

The MoFE's Employment and VET department is in charge of the strategy and policies, legislation and all aspects of funding, the appointment of directors, etc. The National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES) is in charge of the day-to-day administration of VET providers. There are no administrative structures for VET at the subnational level.

The National Agency for VET and Qualifications (NAVETQ) is in charge of implementing the AQF and maintaining the national catalogue of occupations, vocational qualifications and related standards and descriptions; devising framework curricula for all programmes offered in the formal vocational education system; supporting the development of courses in vocational training centres (VTCs); issuing guidelines and instructions for skills assessments and certification; and national activities related to the continuing professional development of teachers and instructors in VET.

The Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (AQAPE) is in charge of the national key competencies frameworks, standards, curricula and teacher training for general subjects, as well as State Matura exams, also in upper secondary VET. The Educational Services Center (the Albanian abbreviation is QSHA), which was established by decision of the Council of Ministers No 371 of 26 April 2017, is responsible for the State Matura, develops national exams as well as the State Exam for Regulated Professions, and administers the state database.

Key achievements of recent years are the establishment and full functioning of the National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES), as well as the expansion of the mandate of the NAVETQ. NAES, which was established in June 2019, expanded from 36 to 90 employees at its head office. The NAVETQ underwent a restructuring process, which resulted in a new organisational structure with 36 staff (increased from 16), covering the new functions for the AQF, the VTCs and teacher training. The

restructuring and hiring processes at both agencies are expected to be completed by the end of 2022. 'The National Council of Vocational Education and Training (NCVET) is a tripartite advisory body established by the VET Law. Its main contribution is to reform the VET system, enhance cooperation with businesses and strengthen their VET engagement. Currently, the National VET Council is not active. Instead, the NAVETQ oversees the management of the Council and reporting on its activity in the MoFE. Social partners in Albania include: (i) the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, representing businesses at the regional level; (ii) the National Chamber of Crafts, established in December 2017; (iii) employers' associations and (iv) trade unions. There are around 80 recognised trade unions in Albania. As social partners, the Government consults them on critical strategic issues related to employment and VET. However, despite the substantial number of social partners, they have little involvement in VET. There is no clear role assigned for them in the legislation. Hence, VET is not part of their agenda, and their contribution is limited' (ETF, 2021, page 4).

The Integrated Policy Management Groups (IPMGs) were transformed into an integrated sector management mechanism and now serve as high-level forums for policy dialogue and partnership to ensure leadership and coordination in the sectors of special importance, with the participation of all key stakeholders (including ETF).

The state budget remains the main source of funding for public initial and continuing VET. However, the Law on VET 15/2017 allows VET providers to benefit from a wider variety of financing sources, which include income generated by public VET providers, such as revenues from training adults (except unemployed jobseekers), donor contributions and sponsorships.

Qualifications, validation and recognition

The Albanian Parliament amended the Law on the AQF in 2018. Since then, the NAVETQ has continued its work on gradually implementing the AQF, developing occupational and vocational qualification standards, as well as framework curricula. In 2021, 21 occupational standards and 21 vocational qualifications standards of AQF levels 2, 3 and 4 were developed.

The by-law on the mechanism for the inclusion of lifelong learning qualifications in the AQF was adopted; however, its implementation is closely linked to the NAVETQ's institutional restructuring, which has caused delays. In February 2022, the Advisory Board of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) approved Albania's report on referencing the AQF to the EQF and its self-referencing to the Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area, which allows for certificates and diplomas awarded for AQF qualifications (obtained in VET, general secondary education or higher education) to have a reference to the specific EQF level (MoFE, 2022).

Quality and quality assurance

Three VET schools offer post-secondary professional qualifications (AQF level 5) in fashion design, diagnostics and management in auto-service in Vlora and Berat, respectively. Most I-VET programmes follow a 2+1+1 structure (2-year basic vocational training, 1 year of specialisation and 1 year of consolidation). Some of the VET programmes (mainly business administration, ICT and forestry) apply the 2+2 structure (a basic 2-year training followed by a 2-year specialisation). The third option is the 4-year structure, only available in a few occupational areas – veterinary medicine, elderly care services – and in some ICT programmes.

The research conducted by Karafili et al (2022) on post-secondary programmes in three selected sectors (ICT, tourism and construction) in 2021 confirmed the potential of post-secondary programmes and showed that most of the surveyed companies are interested in cooperating with educational providers in the design, delivery and assessment of post-secondary programmes.

Continuous VET mostly consists of short-term training courses (3-9 months), which are offered by public VETCs or private entities. There are 10 public VETCs. Around 833 private training providers have been licenced to provide adult training courses, and the basic entry requirement is the completion of basic education.

Formally, the VET system relies on a comprehensive quality assurance framework, including opening procedures and criteria for public VET providers, licensing procedures and criteria for private VET providers, self-assessment, accreditation, monitoring, and inspection. A Decision of the Council of Ministers was issued in 2021 on the new procedures and criteria for the inspection of non-public and public VET providers. The ministry responsible for VET will develop and approve detailed internal regulations for VET inspections. Supported by an online platform, the self-assessment process of VET providers continued in 2021, as a cornerstone of their efforts to improve institutional development and quality.

In 2020, the NAVETQ designed an accreditation model for VET providers, including roles and responsibilities of institutions, standards and accreditation procedures, as well as a roadmap to support the accreditation process roll-out. Following broad consultations with the MoFE, the NAES, pre-university education institutions, social partners, public and non-public VET providers, the model was adopted in 2021. The NAVETQ also designed a roadmap to support the implementation, starting with the capacity-building of 38 external evaluators and NAVETQ staff. Five VET providers are expected to undergo the accreditation process in 2022. The tool was then revised and now also includes new aspects of the regulatory framework for public VET providers, including organisational changes to support internal quality development efforts (MoFE, 2022).

Efforts to consolidate the quality of non-formal training opportunities available to young people advanced further in 2021. RISI Albania partnered with five private non-formal training providers and supported them to diversify their training portfolio in line with the market needs and improve their training offer. In addition, RISI Albania provided career orientation and intermediation for the graduates, which led to a 52% employment rate among those who benefitted from these trainings. Finally, a pilot collaborative methodology between providers and companies was successfully piloted in Elbasan, Durrës and Fier, and will be institutionalised with RISI's support. With regard to the continuous professional development (CPD) of VET teachers in Albania, the NAVETQ finally obtained the mandate and additional staff for this function and established a new unit. In 2021, they developed a draft concept paper to guide future institutional and legal changes and to orient technical support. CPD coordinators were appointed in each school development unit. In 2021, four soft skills training modules (on communication, teamwork, positivity and integrity) were developed and tested, and are now offered to all VET teachers.

A study on inclusive VET for persons with disabilities was published in December 2021 to provide a clear overview of the challenges that students with disabilities face in VET, and the barriers to the implementation of quality and inclusive VET for persons with disabilities, recommending specific actions for the government and other stakeholders (MoFE, 2022).

Work-based learning arrangements

Ministerial Order No 220, which was adopted in 2020, regulates: (i) responsibilities of central institutions, social partners, public VET providers and businesses engaged in the implementation of company-based vocational practice; (ii) procedures and tools for planning, developing and implementing vocational practices in businesses; and (iii) quality assurance aspects to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes of VET qualifications.

The NAVETQ, with support from the Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD), organised regional round tables for school and business representatives to introduce the regulation and its implications and to improve mutual understanding among schools and companies.

This was accompanied by the key establishment of development units in all VET schools, including school-business coordinators and budgets. School-business coordinators are in charge of establishing links with companies and other partners. The NAVETQ, with support from the regional Austrian-funded 'School meets Business' project, has developed a course and trained 21 coordinators since 2019. Positive efforts have also been made by training company mentors.

The framework curriculum allows for 30-35% of work-based learning (WBL) during the first two years, 50% in the third year and 20% in the final year of secondary VET programmes to be implemented in

real work settings. In recent years, it has become increasingly common for VET students to pursue their vocational practice in the workplace from the first year. Students typically rotate between different employers. However, businesses offer internship places to an insufficient number of students, which is why WBL has not been made compulsory in initial VET. When VET schools are unable to find suitable companies, vocational practice may take place in the VET schools' own workshops.

Digital education and skills

In 2020, Albania had an internet penetration rate of 91% (Eurostat). However, the country's large urban-rural divide in broadband coverage and underdeveloped digital infrastructure present barriers to reaping the benefits of digitalisation. Despite continuous improvements, Albania has one of the lowest digital literacy rates in Europe, with only 21% of the population (aged 16-74) having basic digital skills (Eurostat, 2021).

Nevertheless, the use of ICT and internet access by various companies and individuals have changed the labour market in Albania, and the pandemic has accelerated this trend. The use of ICT in Albania is widespread. Based on the results of the Survey on Information and Communication Technologies in Households and by Individuals in 2021, 79.3% of the population aged 16-74 use the internet, of which 91.7% use it every day. In 2021, all technological or computer skills had increased, with the highest growth recorded for skills related to 'software/application installation' and 'materials transfer'. The latter saw an increase of 8.6 percentage points and about 6 percentage points, respectively (INSTAT 2021). Furthermore, the number of workers using platforms, such as freelancers.com or upwork.com, is the highest per capita in Albania, as compared to its regional neighbours (ETF, 2022).

Various national policies explicitly refer to digital skills development. These include the Digital Agenda of Albania and ICT Priorities 2022-2026, the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2019-2022, and the National Education Strategy 2021- 2026, as well as the National Strategy for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation (2017-2022), which announced the development of e-commerce in Albania. Albania also adheres to the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, an EU-funded initiative aiming to improve the digitisation of the learning process which includes an upgrade of the digital school infrastructure, the provision of high-speed internet access for schools, digital communication channels between schools and regional education units, etc.

Curricula are to include digital materials in the Albanian language as well as awareness-raising about how to protect students from the dangers of the internet, etc. ICT curricula were introduced in secondary schools in 2006 and in primary schools in 2014, and now cover grades 3 to 12.

During the academic year of 2018/2019, over 10 000 students were enrolled in the field of ICT, which is a 21% increase compared to the previous academic year. ICT is a well-paid profession and the employment market in Albania is centred around this sector. According to the magazine Monitor, students pursuing ICT are among the most sought-after in the job market. At the graduate level, it is rare to find students who are not employed in these professions and they often start working already during their Bachelor studies.

Statistics on education and training

The National Statistics Office (referred to as INSTAT) regularly publishes quality data on all dimensions of societal development, including education and employment.

3. LABOUR MARKET AND EMPLOYMENT

3.1 Trends and challenges

Labour market characteristics

In 2021, the labour force was estimated to include 1 411 308 persons, among which men accounted for 55.4% and women accounted for 44.6%. In the same year, 1 248 749 persons were in employment, of which males accounted for 55.5% and females for 44.5%. A total of 162 560 people were estimated to be unemployed, of which 54.5% were men and 45.5% were women. The official unemployment rate for the age-group 15-74 years stood at 11.5 % (0.5 percentage points lower for males than females). Compared to 2020, employment increased by 0.4%, while the unemployment rate (aged 15-74) decreased by 0.2 percentage points. Among the population aged 15-64 years, 60.9% were employed, 8.3% were unemployed and 30.7% were economically inactive (outside the labour force). Moreover, 68.2% of the male population aged 15-64 years were employed, 9.1% were unemployed and 22.7% were outside the labour force. Finally, 53.8% of the female population aged 15-64 years were employed, 7.6% were unemployed and 38.6% were outside the labour force. The average monthly gross wage for an employee in Albania was ALL 57 191 (EUR 490), representing a 6.6% increase from the previous year (INSTAT, 2022).

Statistics on and labour market and employment

INSTAT carries out labour force surveys in line with Eurostat methodologies and publishes results quarterly and annually. The National Agency for Employment and Skills maintains a labour market information system. The NAES is planning to establish a sophisticated 'unified' VET information system. In 2020, the NAES conducted a first analysis of the VET Management Information System (VET MIS) and found that, problematically, most of the data and information at the provider level is collected and processed manually.

The Centre for Education Services has initiated work to establish an integrated information system for the entire pre-university education system.

3.2 Employment policy and institutional settings

Strategy and legal framework in the employment policy field

The overarching goal of the National Employment and Skills Strategy, which expires at the end of 2022, is pursued through a number of complementary and interconnected actions that simultaneously support labour supply and encourage labour demand while addressing social inclusion.

Longer-term challenges that were tackled include reducing of the qualitative gap between rural and urban areas in the supply of education and employment; improving the investment climate and unleashing private sector growth; removing barriers to employment for job creation; and implementing the smart specialisation strategy to ensure that Albanian regions identify and develop their own competitive advantages and generate employment demand locally.

Major achievements in modernising the functioning of employment services include: (i) the development of service manuals with descriptions of services, standards, and tools for employment offices; (ii) the reorganisation of all employment offices in line with the National Service Model (one model, same standards and instruments); (iii) training of all management staff on the implementation of individual employment plans for special groups; (iv) the creation of an ICT system to be used by all employment offices at all levels, including a module to evaluate the performance of all employees with indicators at all levels (MoFE, 2022).

The Strategy also foresees the expansion of the range and outreach of ALMPs. Related achievements include: the revision of the legal framework to allow for a diversification of ALMPs; the assessment of needs of special groups to be supported by ALMPs, and the implementation of a variety of new ALMPs, particularly during the lockdown periods. In the final stage of the NESS 2022 implementation, analysis shows that significant progress has been made, especially on the adoption of the new regulatory frameworks for both the VET sector and public employment services and policy, as well as for establishing the new governance and institutional arrangements (MoFE, 2022).

Achievements, challenges and lessons learnt from the implementation of NESS 2022 were used to guide the process of designing and developing the new version of the NESS which will run until 2030 and was submitted for formal approval in November 2022.

2021 and 2022 were also the years when the introduction of the EU Youth Guarantee scheme was at the centre of policy dialogue between various state institutions and the EU. With EU-funded technical assistance, Albania carried out a mapping of NEETs and reviewed the legal framework. A multi-stakeholder group and a technical expert group were set up to prepare the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, to be finalised by the end of 2022.

Initiatives to boost employment

Following the adoption of the new Employment Promotion Law in 2019, the MoFE, in collaboration with the UNDP, undertook a thorough review of the portfolio of ALMPs. Subsequently, the legal and operational framework was adopted in 2020 and implementation commenced in 2021.

ALMPs were redesigned to integrate the individual-centred approach. Three existing ALMPs (the wage subsidy, on-the-job training and the internship programme) were improved to better target unemployed jobseekers and employers alike and to include additional benefits for vulnerable groups (single parents, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities). Inspired by EU Member States, two new programmes, the Self-Employment Programme (SEP) and the Community Employment Programme (CEP) were introduced. The SEP supports registered unemployed jobseekers with robust business plans through grants. The CEP focuses on professional training with nearby SMEs. Moreover, two new programmes to support the reintegration of workers who suffered from COVID-19 related layoffs were designed and adopted in 2020.

All these either new or improved instruments were implemented during 2021 to achieve better responses to the needs of jobseekers, especially the most vulnerable. They were also based on harmonised action between NAES, the State Social Service and local authorities.

Despite steady increases since 2014, the 2021 budget of ALL 846.6 million for ALMPs represented 0.05% of Albania's GDP, significantly below the EU-27 average (0.39% of GDP, 2019 figures).

Before the pandemic, the ALMPs covered around 14 000 jobseekers annually (14 725 in 2017, 13 578 in 2018 and 14 052 in 2019) and were reaching an increasing share of them (from 16.4% in 2017 to 19.8% in 2019). In 2020, due to COVID-19 lockdown and related restrictions, the number of jobseekers who benefitted from ALMPs declined to 8 532, while their share dropped to 10.3% due to an increased number of registered jobseekers. The coverage improved slightly in 2021, but remained just below pre-pandemic levels, with the number of jobseekers benefitting from ALMPs totalling 11 166 (14.9% of all jobseekers in the third quarter of 2021) (European Commission, 2022).

Implementation suffered from various contextual factors, such as the low number of companies meeting the criteria due to the economic slowdown and insufficient human resources (volume and skills) at employment services (e.g. one frontline officer serves on average 360 jobseekers).

Moreover, during 2021, NAES developed monitoring instruments to conduct an ALMP evaluation in 2022, as provided for in the corresponding Decision of the Council of Ministers. The results of this have not been published at the time of drafting this paper.

The labour market has shown resilience throughout the pandemic. However, the funding and coverage of ALMPs are insufficient to make a substantive dent in the increased number of registered

jobseekers and offer sufficient upskilling and reskilling opportunities to enable them to join the labour market.

For the year 2022, the government planned to spend about 0.12% of GDP on continuing temporary employment support programmes and on new or revised programmes to improve the employability of the most vulnerable jobseekers.

Initiatives to increase the capacity of the public employment services

Albania has effectively strengthened its labour market institutions, as mentioned above. The Directorate-General of NAES, established in 2019, had reached 70% of its staffing needs at the start of 2022.

In 2021, with IPA support, the NAES introduced a new information system, trained its staff and started to develop individual employment plans for jobseekers.

The restructuring of all Regional Directorates and Local Employment Offices was addressed by clarifying the division of roles and responsibilities and work optimisation, in order to improve service quality for both jobseekers and employers. In total, 40 employment offices were reorganised and now align their standards with the national model of employment services. The Employment Advisory Council endorsed the revised employment services manual, including specific provisions for each service, at the end of 2020. Training was regularly delivered with ILO support.

Albania has also been developing tools to regularly monitor the labour market and skills needs. In 2021, the NAES, with help from the RisiAlbania project, piloted a regional labour market analysis in Elbasan to improve the planning of short-term training. The NAES started work on developing a labour market observatory, which will build on existing administrative and survey data and on scraping of big data to capture macro-level developments in the labour market and various sectors of the economy. The NAES is working on focusing ALMPs to better target jobseekers' profiles. However, the programmes do not emphasise increased participation in ALMPs or in vocational training, without which only a marginal impact can be expected on the labour market.

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ALBANIA: STATISTICAL ANNEX

The Annex includes annual data from 2010, 2015, 2019, 2020 and 2021 or the last available year.

	Indicator	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	
1	Total Population (in thousands) ⁽¹⁾	2 913.0	2 880.7	2 854.2	2 837.8	2 811.7	
2	Relative size of youth population (age group 15-24 and denominator age 15-64. %) ^{(1) C}	27.3	25.1	22.5	21.8	21.1	
3	GDP growth rate (%)	3.7	2.2	2.1	-3.5	8.5	
4	Gross value added by sector (%)	Agriculture	18.0	19.8	18.4	19.3	17.7
		Industry	24.9	21.8	20.6	20.0	21.8
		Services	44.0	46.3	48.4	48.4	47.7
5	Public expenditure on education (as % of GDP)	M.D.	3.4	3.9	3.1	M.D.	
6	Public expenditure on education (as % of total public expenditure)	M.D.	11.2	13.4	12.1	M.D.	
7	Adult literacy (%) ^C	96.8 ⁽⁶⁾	M.D.	98.1 ⁽⁷⁾	M.D.	M.D.	
8	Educational attainment of total population (aged 15+) (%)	Low ⁽²⁾	57.8	51.4	48.2	M.D.	M.D.
		Medium ⁽³⁾	33.3	34.4	34.8	M.D.	M.D.
		High ⁽⁴⁾	8.9	14.2	17.0	M.D.	M.D.
9	Early leavers from education and training (aged 18-24) (%)	Total	31.9	21.3	16.3	M.D.	M.D.
		Male	31.0	22.9	17.5	M.D.	M.D.
		Female	33.0	19.6	15.1	M.D.	M.D.
10	Net enrolment rates in secondary education (ISCED level 2-3) (%)	M.D.	87.4	85.7	85.2	87.1	
11	Share of VET students in upper secondary education (ISCED level 3) (%)	14.2	16.3	18.2	18.0	17.6	
12	Low achievement in reading, mathematics and science – PISA (%)	Reading	56.7 ⁽⁵⁾	50.3	52.2 ⁽⁷⁾	N.A.	N.A.
		Mathematics	67.7 ⁽⁵⁾	53.3	42.4 ⁽⁷⁾	N.A.	N.A.
		Science	57.3 ⁽⁵⁾	41.7	47.0 ⁽⁷⁾	N.A.	N.A.
13	Activity rate (aged 15+) (%)	Total	55.2	55.7	60.4	59.5	59.8
		Male	64.0	64.3	68.0	66.9	67.2
		Female	46.9	47.2	53.0	52.3	52.6
14	Inactivity rate (aged 15+) (%)	Total	44.8	44.3	39.6	40.5	40.2
		Male	36.0	35.7	32.0	33.1	32.8

	Indicator	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	
		Female	53.1	52.8	47.0	47.7	47.4
15	Employment rate (aged 15+) (%)	Total	47.5	46.2	53.4	52.5	52.9
		Male	55.9	53.3	60.1	59.2	59.5
		Female	39.5	39.2	46.9	46.1	46.4
16	Employment rate by educational attainment (aged 15+) (%)	Low ⁽²⁾	43.0	41.4	48.6	46.3	45.9
		Medium ⁽³⁾	50.1	47.9	53.7	54.0	54.9
		High ⁽⁴⁾	66.9	59.2	66.4	66.6	68.0
17	Employment by sector (%)	Agriculture	42.1	41.3	36.4	36.1 ^c	33.8 ^c
		Industry	20.6	18.6	20.1	18.2 ^c	19.3 ^c
		Services	37.3	39.9	43.5	45.7 ^c	46.9 ^c
18	Incidence of self-employment (%)		56.7	59.0	54.3	53.9 ^c	52.1 ^c
19	Incidence of vulnerable employment (%)		55.1	56.6	51.2	M.D.	M.D.
20	Unemployment rate (aged 15+) (%)	Total	14.0	17.1	11.5	11.7	11.5
		Male	12.6	17.1	11.6	11.5	11.3
		Female	15.9	17.1	11.4	11.9	11.8
21	Unemployment rate by educational attainment (aged 15+) (%)	Low ⁽²⁾	12.9	13.4	8.7	9.5	10.6
		Medium ⁽³⁾	15.7	20.4	14.4	13.6	13.2
		High ⁽⁴⁾	13.7	19.4	12.3	12.6	10.5
22	Unemployment rate (aged 15-24) (%)	Total	30.5	39.8	27.2	26.5	27.1
		Male	29.6	39.2	27.8	27.0	25.5
		Female	31.7	40.8	26.3	25.9	29.2
23	Proportion of people aged 15–24 not in employment, education or training (NEETs) (%)	Total	29.3	29.6	25.5	26.6	24.0
		Male	25.4	28.2	25.8	27.1	22.1
		Female	33.2	31.1	25.3	26.2	25.9
24	Participation in training/lifelong learning (% aged 25-64)	Total	2.1	1.0	0.8	M.D.	M.D.
		Male	2.1	1.0	1.0	M.D.	M.D.
		Female	2.2	1.1	0.7	M.D.	M.D.
25	Human Development Index		0.745	0.788	0.795	M.D.	M.D.

Last update: 20/10/2022

Sources:

Indicators 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7: The World Bank. World Development Indicators database

Indicators 7. 10. 11: UNESCO. Institute for Statistics

Indicators 8. 9. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17 (2010-2019). 18 (2010-2019). 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24: Instat. LFS

Indicator 12: OECD PISA 2018 Results (Volume I) Annex B1

Indicator 17. 18: ETF Calculations based on Instat Labour Market 2021 (2020-2021).

<http://www.instat.gov.al/media/10066/tregu-i-punes-2021.pdf>

Indicator 25: UNDP

Notes:

(1) Estimation.

(2) Low – ISCED 0-2.

(3) Medium - ISCED 3-4.

(4) High - ISCED 5-8.

(5) applies to 2009.

(6) applies to 2011.

(7) applies to 2018.

Legend:

C= ETF calculations

N.A. = Not Applicable

M.D. = Missing Data

	EU Monitoring Indicators	2015	2019	2020	2021	EU (2021b)
26	Share of early school leavers (% aged 18-24)	31.9	17.4	16.3	M.D.	9.7
	<i>Female</i>	19.6	15.1	M.D.	M.D.	12.6
27	Share of those aged 20-29 low educated (ISCED 0-2)	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	14.8
	<i>Female</i>	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	12.7
28	Share of those aged 20-24 who attained ISCED levels 3-8	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	84.6
	<i>Female</i>	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	87.1
29	Share of those aged 25-34 high educated (ISCED 5-8)	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	41.2
	<i>Female</i>	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	46.8
30	Participation in formal education (% aged 15-29)	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	39.5
	<i>Female</i>	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	41.1
31	Participation in formal education and work (% aged 15-29)	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	15.2
	<i>Female</i>	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	15.7
32	Not in employment/education/training (NEETs) aged 15-29	32.8	26.6	27.9	M.D.	13.1
	<i>Inactive</i>	19.4	16.9	18.1	M.D.	8.2
	<i>Unemployed</i>	13.4	9.7	9.8	M.D.	4.9
	<i>Male</i>	29.4	24.3	25.8	M.D.	11.8
	<i>Male Inactive</i>	14.0	13.3	14.4	M.D.	6.3

	EU Monitoring Indicators	2015	2019	2020	2021	EU (2021b)
	<i>Male Unemployed</i>	15.4	11.0	11.4	M.D.	5.5
	<i>Female</i>	36.6	28.9	30.0	M.D.	14.5
	<i>Female Inactive</i>	25.4	20.5	21.9	M.D.	10.2
	<i>Female Unemployed</i>	11.1	8.3	8.1	M.D.	4.3
33	Youth employment rate (% aged 15-24)	18.9	26.7	26.3	26.4	32.7
	<i>Female</i>	13.4	22.2	21.1	22.3	30.3
34	Employment rate of tertiary graduates aged 20-34	45.7	58.6	M.D.	M.D.	79.6
35	Employment rate of ISCED 3-4 VET graduates aged 20-34	50.3	64.5	M.D.	M.D.	76.4
36	Employment rate (% aged 20-64)	59.3	67.1	66.3	66.3	73.1
	<i>Female</i>	50.7	59.7	58.8	58.3	67.7
37	Youth unemployment rate (% aged 15-24)	39.8	27.2	26.5	27.1	16.6
	<i>Female</i>	40.8	26.3	27.0	25.5	16.7
38	Unemployment rate (% aged 15+)	17.1	11.5	11.7	11.5	7.0
	<i>Female</i>	17.1	11.4	11.9	11.8	7.4
39	Lifelong learning during past 4 weeks (% aged 25-64)	1.0	0.8	M.D.	M.D.	10.8
	<i>Low-educated (ISCED 0-2)</i>	0.2	0.1	M.D.	M.D.	4.3
	<i>Unemployed</i>	1.6	1.7	M.D.	M.D.	12.7

Key donor projects in education, training and employment

The IPA 2019 EU for Inclusion programme aims to strengthen social inclusion by increasing the coverage, inclusiveness and effectiveness of social care services, as well as the provision of inclusive education and employment opportunities. It supports the NESS 2019-2022 by promoting employment and employability with new service models, introducing a new employment programme for NEETs, expanding coverage of welfare-to-work programmes, and strengthening education and training programmes throughout the country. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. improve the accessibility and quality of integrated social care services at local level;
2. promote social inclusion in employment and employability for youth, men and women; and
3. operate through a combination of instruments including sector budget support, grants and technical assistance.

The EU also provides financial support to Albania through the 'Support to the Education and Employment' programme, which aims to improve access to quality education and employment opportunities.

World Bank: The World Bank provides support to Albania through programmes such as the Albania Skills for Competitiveness Project, which aims to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational education and training.

German Development Cooperation: The German government provides support to Albania through programmes such as the 'Support for the Labour Market and Social Policy Reforms' programme, which aims to improve the labour market and social policies in the country.

Swiss aid: Skills for Jobs (S4J) is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) and is implemented by Swisscontact. The project is part of the Economic Development and Employment Domain of the Swiss Cooperation and Strategy for Albania, with a specific focus on employability. The main goal of the 'Skills for Jobs' (S4J) project is to offer young people in Albania the best vocational education and training.

USAID Albania: This programme is focused on improving the quality of education and job skills in Albania through reforms in the education and labour sectors.

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