

KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT – KOSOVO* 2022

*This designation is without prejudice to any positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects a 2.7% real GDP growth for Kosovo in 2022 and ca. 3-4% in 2023. Kosovo's high dependence on imports makes it quite exposed to international market dynamics, including price hikes in electricity, food products and transport. The IMF expects inflation to decline to 4.4% in 2022 (IMF, 2022).

Annual Labour Force Survey (LFS) data for 2021 show that among working-age Kosovars (15-65 age group), inactivity reached 60.7%, with the female rate as high as 78.9% and the male rate at 43.4%. In other words, only 39.3% of working-age Kosovars participated in the labour force. The employment rate amounted to 31.3%. Kosovo observed the highest gains in the employment rate among the six Western Balkan countries between 2020 and 2021, thanks to the 50 000 jobs added or formalised. There continues to be a stark gender employment gap, the largest in Europe, with the male rate reaching 45.9% and the female rate staying as low as 16.5%. This gap is, however, on a decreasing trend from 39.4 percentage points in 2017. Among the reasons is the lower involvement of women in entrepreneurship, which is linked to lower access to finance and property, as well as family responsibilities and the lack of affordable early childhood education and care facilities. The unemployment rate reached 20.7%. Unemployment was higher among females with a rate of 25.0%, compared to the male rate of 19%. Youth unemployment among the 15-24 age group was highest in the Western Balkan region with 38.0% (Kosovo Agency for Statistics - KAS¹). LFS 2021 data stem from the period before economic recovery gained full momentum and should improve again for 2022.

An intergovernmental group under the leadership of the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers (MFLT) drafted a first multiannual plan to implement the EU Youth Guarantee scheme in Kosovo. In 2020, 'approx. 193,000 young people (15-29) were not in employment, education or training (NEET), corresponding to 40.4% of the total youth population. Both figures are very high, not only compared to the EU-27 average, but also to Western Balkan peers. NEET rates are higher for women compared to men (43% and 38%, respectively), for young people living in Mitrovica and Ferizaj (55.5% and 47.4%), and with tertiary educational attainment (51.5%). Approx. 73.4% of NEET are inactive. Young unemployed people represent 26.6% of the total NEET count, with a prevalence of long-term unemployed (18.7% of all NEET)' (MFLT, 2022, p. 6). The Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan includes both preventative measures to make education and VET more relevant and measures to expand offers for NEET. Challenges include how to reach out and activate NEET, given that few register with the Employment Agency, and how to garner the capacities of the Employment Agency.

Kosovo's government has adopted a new Education Strategy 2022-2026 and the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) is working on the annual action plan for 2023. Reform initiatives are under way, for instance, to connect schools to the internet, procure computers and appoint IT coordinators in schools. For this purpose, EUR 6.5 million has been made available annually for the next three years. An agreement has been signed with the World Bank to procure hardware. There are declining student numbers and empty classrooms in some places, but overcrowded schools (66% working in shifts) in other places; this has prompted MESTI to create a working group on readjusting the school network. Another MESTI working group is working on a new funding formula for education.

New developments in VET were initiated in the area of work-based learning (WBL), regulated by MESTI's Regulation 135/2020 and Administrative Instruction 137/2020. Under the KfW Development Bank's Kosovo Challenge Fund, VET schools cooperate with private partners to offer WBL. A new project run by GIZ and the GFA Consulting Group (2022-2024) involves 10 VET schools and 1 VET centre of competence in nine municipalities. 5 000 11th and 12th-grade students will benefit from company internships in all 58 profiles covered, for which 600 agreements were signed with businesses. The project will draft a standardised WBL lesson plan, train professional teachers, help companies implement WBL, and deliver training for 10 school-business coordinators.

¹ <https://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/labour-force-survey-lfs-in-kosovo-2021>

1. KEY POLITICAL, DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Political developments

Pro-European Vetëvendosje's Albin Kurti took over as Prime Minister and has been leading the government since March 2021.

Demographics

Kosovo's population is estimated to be 1.77 million (KAS, 2022). A new census will take place in 2023, brought back from 2021. The latest census from 2011 did not consider some provinces in the north of Kosovo. The majority of people in Kosovo are Albanians, while there are some 120 000 Serbs, about one third of whom live in the north. Among the EU candidate countries and potential candidates, Kosovo has the highest share of young people (under 25 years; 24.0% in 2021) (idem). Kosovo's birth rate has been declining, from 2.7 in 2000 to 1.66 in 2019, and mainly young people and their families are migrating abroad.

In the past 10 years, 529 647 citizens, or almost 30% of the population, left the country (KAS). The OECD states: 'Kosovo has the second highest emigration rate among the Western Balkan Six (WB6) economies, with 22% of its population living in OECD countries. Emigration flows to European countries have been growing in the past decade. More than half of the Kosovar migrants of working age in OECD countries have low levels of education (52%), while the share of highly skilled migrants is relatively low at 13%' (OECD, 2022, p. 1). Wage gaps are an important pull factor driving emigration. In addition, gaps in human capital are emerging as a powerful determinant for explaining emigration to countries where returns to human capital are comparatively higher (ETF, 2022; Mara and Landesmann, 2022).

The triple demographic challenge of declining birth rates, the emigration of families and the rural exodus are seen in primary and lower secondary schools, where there are ever fewer students. This has repercussions for infrastructure and staff planning in education, as well as for future workforce availability.

Key economic developments

GDP grew by 10.5% in 2021, recuperating from the GDP loss of -5.3% in 2020 (European Commission (EC), 2022a). Kosovo's GDP in purchasing power standards as a percentage of the EU-27 GDP remains below 30% (wiiw & Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). The IMF projects 2.7% real GDP growth for Kosovo in 2022 and ca. 3-4% in 2023 (IMF, 2022).

Kosovo's high dependence on imports makes it quite exposed to international market dynamics, including price hikes in electricity, food products and transport. 'Inflation reached 9.7% year on year in January-May 2022, while price hikes in electricity, food products and transport reached 12%, 13% and 17%, respectively, over the same period' (wiiw, 2022, p. 1). However, the IMF expects inflation to decline to 4.4% in 2022 (IMF, 2022).

'Remittances are coming to the rescue, and they will help to smooth consumption, as they also did during the pandemic. In the first four months of the year remittances recorded a rise of 6% compared with the same period in 2021. In June 2022 the gross minimum wage rose to €264, from €150 previously, which will affect 27% of employees. In April 2020 the government had offered a lump sum of €100 to 800,000 citizens – 44% of the total population, mainly pensioners, public- and private-sector employees and students – to cope with the strong rise in prices. [...] The international energy turmoil has pushed many countries to go back to coal for their energy production. This is reflected in the strong rise of lignite exports from Kosovo, which in real terms rose tenfold in January-April 2022, year on year. Positive dynamics are also recorded for foreign direct investment inflows, which were up by

41% in the 1st quarter of 2022, year on year, although the majority of this continues to be absorbed by the real estate sector' (wiiw, 2022, p. 1).

Kosovo's informal sector is among the highest in Europe. This hinders economic development and strains already tight budgets. Depending on the definition used, informal workers made up between 35.6% and 42.4%² of the workers aged 15-64 in 2018. Informality is higher among youth, men, less-educated people and rural residents (Robayo-Abril et al., 2020). Businesses that did not pay taxes and individuals who worked without contracts were excluded from short-term Government assistance during the pandemic, which is why many made an effort to register. Kosovo has designed a strategy to address the underlying causes of informality but has not yet implemented it (EC, 2022a). On a positive note, since Government support during the pandemic was linked to *formal* businesses and jobs, 'the Pensions Savings Trust reported that the number of active pension contributors increased by 16% in the 2nd quarter of 2022 (year on year), equivalent to about 50,000 jobs being added or formalized' (World Bank, 2022a, p. 9).

According to the Kosovo Investment and Enterprise Support Agency (KIESA), key sectors with potential for investment and growth include³:

- ICT, with the possibility to offer business services such as software development or call centres to local and foreign clients. Kosovo claims to have relatively widespread English language skills and high internet penetration. The ETF (2022) has conducted a study on the platform economy;
- food processing and packaging, with Kosovo having 588 000 hectares of agricultural land with
- fertile, nutrient-rich soils and a strong agribusiness tradition;
- mining and metal processing, as Kosovo is rich in natural resources, such as lignite, aluminium,
- gold, lead, zinc, copper, bauxite, magnesium, asbestos, chromite, limestone, marble and quartz.
- Most resources remain unused;
- energy, including from renewable sources, including hydro, wind, solar,
- biomass and thermal energy;
- textile and leather processing;
- wood processing, with an estimated 53 million m³ of wood available from public forests and a tradition in exporting raw materials, semi-finished and finished products (doors, windows, kitchens and furniture);
- tourism, offering opportunities for mountain, adventure, farm, spiritual and thermal bath tourism.

Key social issues

Kosovo is the second poorest country in the Western Balkans after Albania. An estimated 25% of the total population in 2022 live on less than USD 6.85 per person per day (the latest actual poverty rate was 34.2% in 2017)⁴ (World Bank, 2022a, p. 17). Household Budget Survey data shows that poor people are overrepresented in households headed by women, in households in which the head did not complete secondary education, in larger households and those with more children, and among

² The estimates vary depending on the definition of informality. When defining informal workers as those who are employees and employers in small firms (five or fewer workers), self-employed with or without employees in non-professional occupations (i.e. clerks, service and market sales workers, agricultural workers, craft workers, machine operators and workers in non-professional occupations) or unpaid family workers, informality amounts to 42.4% based on the 2018 Labour Force Survey (LFS) data. If defined as an employee with no written contract, self-employed in firms with fewer than five workers, self-employed in non-professional occupations or unpaid family workers, the informality rate is 35.6% (Robayo-Abril et al., 2020).

³ See: [KIESA \(rks-gov.net\)](https://www.rks-gov.net).

⁴ Poverty is defined as living on less than USD 6.85 per day per person in 2017 PPPs. Calculations by the World Bank based on its ECA Poverty Database; harmonisation using Household Budget Survey data for Kosovo.

Kosovars belonging to the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian populations (World Bank, 2022b, p. 10). The pandemic has also ‘highlighted the vulnerability of the population to negative shocks’ (p. 7).

Kosovo’s poverty rate in 2022 dropped by an estimated 7.4 percentage points due to the fact that employment picked up again and the Government’s financial stimulus, which was extended into 2021, continued to lift household income. Poverty reduction may, however, slow in 2023 due to the price hikes in food and energy supplies (World Bank, 2022c, p. 28).

The most disadvantaged people do not always benefit from adequate social assistance. The World Bank (2022b) notes that ‘recent increases in spending on war-related pensions have crowded out spending toward the poor. Disability benefits require declaration of 100% disability with regular re-assessments’ (p. 8). An expansion of social assistance coverage, using a means-tested scheme and including people not only with full but also partial disabilities, would be needed for stronger poverty reduction.

2. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1 Trends and challenges

In the 2021/22 school year, 224 429 pupils attended primary and lower secondary education (both public and private) – a decline of 18% compared to the 273 649 pupils in 2014/15. In the same academic year, 70 850 pupils attended upper secondary education – a decline of 15.4% from the same period (KAS, 2022, p. 79 of 308). Teacher-student ratios are low, with an average of 1:17.7, with some VET profiles and classes having a much lower ratio, reaching a maximum of 27.9 in the municipality of Fushë Kosovë (MESTI, 2022a, p. 72). However, there is a general shortage of school buildings, which requires 65% of all schools to work in two shifts and 1% even in three shifts (source: EMIS data 2021/22), preventing schools from carrying out after-school activities.

While student numbers have declined over the past 10 years, the number of teachers has risen. Some small municipalities have established gymnasia or opened certain VET programmes, despite not having the conditions in place for them. They are reluctant to change VET programmes now to ‘avoid surplus teaching staff’ who are paid centrally by the Ministry of Finance (MESTI, 2022a, p. 34). MESTI mentions some 2 000 surplus teachers on the payroll who do not have specific teaching assignments but cannot be moved to other locations. An adjustment of education provision and staffing numbers might allow the Kosovo government to invest saved funds into upgrading education and training facilities, offers and quality (Viertel, 2020, p. 17). A MESTI working group is currently looking into the issue of adjusting the school network.

The management of pre-university education is shared between MESTI, municipal education directorates (MEDs) and schools. MEDs, which are generally understaffed, handle all procurement issues for schools and pay their bills. This can create problems for schools, as they fully depend on MEDs. MESTI lacks the legal basis and capacity to control how state education funds are used. Reporting lines from MEDs to MESTI are almost non-existent. Thus, the decentralised management system needs major structural reforms, perhaps as part of a reorganisation of the entire regional set-up of Kosovo and reform of public administration. Generally, there is a lack of investment in improving the quality of infrastructure, reforming curricula, improving teachers’ skills and updating and learning (MEST, 2022b, p. 30). MESTI, through a dedicated working group, is working on a new funding formula for education, including VET.

Efforts need to continue to enhance curriculum reform and the development of teacher skills towards competence-based approaches at all levels, with a specific emphasis on key competences as defined by the EU framework⁵ and labour market-relevant skills. According to the EC’s assessment of Kosovo’s Economic Reform Programme 2022-2024, ‘improving the quality and relevance of the education system to increase employment and mitigate skills mismatches’ is one of Kosovo’s three structural challenges (EC, 2022b, p. 300).

Human capital challenges in Kosovo broadly relate to the need to:

- use demographic, labour market and skills-needs analyses to inform and align skills formation systems for young people and adults;
- nurture, across all curricula and levels of education, cross-curricular key competences with a specific emphasis on maths, linguistics, digital, citizenship, entrepreneurship and career management skills;
- raise the quality and relevance of general and vocational education overall; and
- implement integrated measures that address labour demand and supply-side issues and combine training with insights into workplace practices and support for business start-ups and growth (Viertel, 2020, p. 35).

⁵ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2018.189.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2018:189:TOC.

Education strategy and legal framework for education

MESTI, with support from international partners, drew up the Education Strategy 2022-2026, which the Government approved on 30 September 2022. MESTI is currently working on the first annual action plan. The Strategy was based on a prior thorough analysis of the available evidence and key challenges in education (see e.g. Bajrami, 2021). It also includes, for the first time, a chapter on digitising education (see section below for more details). The estimated costs amount to EUR 322 million (MESTI, 2022b, p. 10), which puts some question marks on strategy implementation. A systematic monitoring system will need to be put in place to capture annual progress.

There is a need for a general overhaul of the legal framework: the Law on Early Childhood Education (being finalised and to be adopted; at present, only pre-school education is regulated); the Law on Pre-university Education (to be revised); the Laws on VET and Adult Education and Training (to be merged and revised); and the Law on Higher Education (pending for many years; to be adopted). All laws would need to be duly cross-referenced with issues related to the funding and management of education in municipalities; the National Qualifications Framework (NQF); the Law on Regulated Professions (not yet implemented); and oversight, funding, management, development and quality assurance of the system by the various national agencies, etc.

Education expenditure

With a government expenditure on education that amounted to 4.1% in 2021 (down from 4.6% in 2020 and 4.3% in 2019 – KAS, 2022, p. 80), Kosovo is broadly in line with the EU average. However, in terms of outcomes, Kosovo fares worse. A child from Kosovo born in 2020 can expect to have spent an average of 13.2 years in education by the time they turn 18. However, factoring in what children actually learn, there are only 7.9 expected years of schooling (World Bank Human Capital Index 2020).

The current per capita funding formula, which has remained unchanged since 2008, takes into account the number of students and teachers, special education needs and non-wage operational costs. So far, school management has had little discretion over their budgets and lack autonomous budget management systems. Municipal education directorates (MEDs) are in charge of budget plans and submit them to the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers (MFLT), while MESTI has little control over how many funds go where and how they are used.

MESTI does not have a specific budget line for adult education and training. Training for unemployed adults is part of active employment policies and funded through the MFLT.

Access, participation and early school leaving

Only 23 of Kosovo's 38 municipalities have at least one public kindergarten facility – 49 in total throughout Kosovo (MESTI, 2022b, p. 25) – and their infrastructure is not always suitable for small children. Services are almost non-existent in rural areas. In addition, the closure of facilities during the pandemic did not spare kindergartens. The gross inclusion rate in early childhood education and care for children aged 0-5 years is 6.7% – the lowest in the region, although data on attendance in unlicensed private kindergartens is missing. 88.1% of children attend pre-primary education, but for no more than 2 to 2.5 hours per day in public institutions. In private institutions, the duration is 7 to 8 hours per day. The draft Law on Early Childhood Education envisages making pre-primary education compulsory for all children from September 2023 'if conditions allow'. Fewer girls are sent to kindergartens than boys, especially outside Prishtina (ibid, p. 25 et seq.). Didactic guidelines and materials are inadequate. Five textbooks have been developed since 2018, but are considered unsuitable for the age group. MESTI is working on a new curriculum.

The inclusion rate in primary education was 101.2% in 2020/2021. In the past two decades, the government, with the help of donors, has invested in constructing and refurbishing school buildings and facilities. Learning is conducted in four languages: Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian and Turkish. Special Learning Centres have been established in various municipalities, which have helped improve the participation of children from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) families in compulsory education

(9 years). However, the sustainable funding of the Learning Centres is not ensured, and RAE attendance at upper secondary level remains low despite scholarships provided by MESTI (ibid, p. 27 et seq.).

It is estimated that 38 000 children with disabilities in Kosovo do not attend school. Their number has increased in regular schools but decreased in the resource centres. Key problems include the lack of suitable definitions of various forms of disability, barrier-free access to schools and adequate support, and the low number of suitably qualified teachers and assistants (ibid, p. 28f.).

Official data has always stated a low dropout rate. However, such data may be incomplete as schools tend to under-report on this phenomenon. Recent NEET rates (see section below) speak a different language. The previous National Team against School Dropout, with its 2-year action plan for 2016 to 2018, monitoring framework and support for over 80 schools in 10 municipalities, helped improve the situation (ibid, p. 29), but these donor-funded initiatives could not be sustained at the same level.

At upper secondary level, VET remains a second choice into which lower-performing students enrol. The enrolment rate of upper secondary school students in VET programmes has remained around 50% since 2015. All students have the chance to sit State Matura exams, regardless of in which programme they enrol – a fact that is hotly debated in Kosovo.

Initial VET is provided in 68 vocational schools. This includes the six VET ‘centres of competence’, which operate under the Agency for VET and Adult Education (AVETAE). The Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK) directly manages eight publicly funded vocational training centres (VTCs). Furthermore, some private VTCs offer training in profiles that are sought after in Kosovo and abroad, such as in the healthcare or construction sectors. Fee-based courses often meet higher standards and are accredited by the National Qualifications Authority (NQA). Relatively high progression rates from VET to higher education and low university completion rates point to inefficiencies in the public skills formation systems.

Once out of school, few possibilities remain for adults to develop their skills. 2 000 learners attended adult education programmes comprising grades 10, 11 and 12 (MESTI 2022, p. 71). Of these, only 504, or 25%, were female. Efforts are made to include jobseekers in formal education programmes in vocational schools or non-formal short courses in VTCs. The adult learning participation rate (25-64) was 5.6% in 2020, an improvement of 2.9 percentage points from 2019 (KAS). However, adult training opportunities across Kosovo remain restricted. Courses are often short and at basic skills levels. The training provided does not always improve the position of young people on the labour market. Low-skilled jobseekers benefit the least from training provision, which often prevents them from moving out of unemployment (Viertel, 2020).

PISA results

In the OECD’s 2015 and 2018 PISA tests in reading, mathematics and science, Kosovo ranked among the low performers out of all participating countries. In 2018, only 21% of students attained at least Level 2 proficiency in reading (OECD average: 77%), while around 23% of students attained Level 2 or higher in both mathematics and science (OECD average: 76% and 78% respectively) (OECD, 2019). Science results dropped by 9% compared to 2015. This means that most of Kosovo’s students fall below Level 2 in reading, mathematics and science proficiency, the baseline required as a foundation for later learning and work.

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

Young people in Kosovo face a very difficult transition from school to employment. The unemployment rate among young people aged 15 to 24 stood at 38.0% in 2021 (down from 49.1% in 2020), with more than half being unemployed for longer than 12 months, putting them in the category of long-term unemployed. In 2020, ‘approx. 193,000 young people (15-29) were not in employment, education or training (NEET), corresponding to 40.4% of the total youth population (in 2021, the rate dropped to 39%). Both figures are very high, not only compared to the EU-27 average but also to Western Balkan peers. In 2021, NEET rates were higher for women compared to men (39% and 34.5%, respectively).

For young people living in Mitrovica and Ferizaj they were 55.5% and 47.4%, and for youth with tertiary educational attainment (51.5%). Approx. 73.4% of the total NEET population are young people who are inactive, due to discouragement (27.6%), family and care responsibilities (16%) and for other non-specified reasons (19.5%). Young unemployed people represent 26.6% of the total NEET count, with a prevalence of long-term unemployed (18.7% of all NEET)' (MFLT, 2022, p. 6).

To address the situation on the supply side, an intergovernmental group has drawn up a multiannual Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. Implementation will be supported by IPA III funding, among others. One challenge will be reaching out to and activating NEETs, given that by far not all of them register with the Employment Agency.

2.2 Initial VET and adult learning

Strategic and legal framework for initial VET and adult learning

The new Education Strategy 2022-2026 also covers VET. The first annual Action Plan for 2023 is being agreed upon.

While a specific Law on VET (No 04/L-138) was adopted in 2013, it does not comprehensively regulate VET for young people and adults, needs to be updated. It misses cross-references to other pieces of primary legislation. These include the Law on Pre-University Education (No 04/L-032); the Law on Education in the Municipalities (No 03/L-068); the Law on Higher Education (No 04/L-037); the Law on Adult Education and Training (No 04/L-143); the Law on the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK); and the Laws on the National Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Authority (NQA). Hence, the legal framework for VET is complex, fragmented, and sometimes incomplete and contradictory. Donors have added to this complexity by introducing new pieces of secondary legislation and different practices in pilot institutions. A new base law for VET could push the reform process forward, capturing the latest developments and decisions, and regulating all aspects of initial and continuing VET at different skills levels. Stakeholders in VET and autonomous VET providers need a clear and enabling legal environment to be able to operate.

VET governance and financing arrangements

VET is managed as part of the overall education system as described above. Exceptions are the six so-called (VET) Centres of Competence, for which the Agency for VET and Adult Education (AVETA) has some responsibility. AVETA does not currently have the capacity to manage all VET schools, as envisaged by the Law on VET, but could be upgraded to do so. GIZ is coordinating a respective feasibility study.

The EARK provides institutional funding for, and refers unemployed jobseekers directly to, the seven Vocational Training Centres (VTCs) that provide shorter courses. However, the EARK does not have capacity to oversee the entire adult training landscape, nor to offer any type of development support to these public centres. They do get some support under various donor projects.

The tripartite National VET Council is not working properly. Regional VET councils or sector skills committees do not exist. Therefore, in essence, no effective social dialogue takes place on the various aspects of VET legislation, policies, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Social dialogue does take place under the Social Economic Council led by the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers (MFLT), but this is related to labour legislation and provisions.

VET funding has not increased significantly in recent years (MESTI, 2022b, p. 34), while the current per capita funding formula is inadequate, in particular for VET schools, which require more resources compared to general secondary schools, taking into account their specific needs for equipment and materials, teachers' continuous professional development, etc. The IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance) / ADA (Austrian Development Agency) 2017 ALLED2 project developed a suitable VET financing formula and online tools for budget planning, which are proposed to be mainstreamed. While

VET schools are allowed to generate their own income, their lack of autonomy and other practical problems prevent them from doing so.

Qualifications, validation and recognition

The Law on the Kosovo Qualifications Framework was adopted in 2008. The framework now includes 193 VET and 396 higher education qualifications. However, these may be linked to individual providers only, may overlap. The National Qualifications Authority (NQA) has accredited 92 VET providers. It uses an e-accreditation management system that assists providers in the process⁶. A report by Rizvanolli-Bajraktari (2021), drafted in the context of the IPA/ADA 2017 ALLED2 project, points to some issues regarding the validation of qualifications and the accreditation of providers. Contentious issues include, among others, the fact that labour market players are not always involved in the quality assurance of qualifications; qualifications are linked to individual providers, which has led to a plethora of overlapping qualifications; the NQA's regulation on a modular approach is not followed in curriculum development; MESTI does not see a need for public VET institutions to go through an accreditation process, and hence initial VET qualifications offered by public VET schools are not part of the NQF; incidences of corruption to obtain institutional accreditation; etc. Discussions are ongoing to address these issues and to bring NQF-related functions under an enlarged AVETAE.

The IPA/LuxDev 2018 ESVET-PRO project identified priority profiles in which services for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) could be offered; published manuals for the accreditation and evaluation of RPL providers; undertook various promotion activities; and trained 16 experts who will assess applications of RPL providers and 18 trainers who will train RPL providers in the future.

Quality and quality assurance

National curriculum frameworks for general education and VET would need to be updated and guide the overhaul of curricula, rather than each donor following their own approaches. In this context, Kosovo could refer to the EU framework for key competences. The Ministry decided not to introduce VET curricula in schools. Instead, they have been revised by teachers in the past few years, due to the absence of an agreed common model. Whether curricula for initial VET are to be based more strictly on labour market qualifications remains an open question, as VET programmes are still highly academic and prepare students for State Matura exams. Only a few VET curricula, which were developed with the help of donors, may be considered up to standard. Work has now recommenced on a national VET curriculum framework.

As regards textbooks for general subjects, there are still basic problems with gender stereotypes and non-discriminatory language. In addition, publishing online in PDF format does not really equate to having 'online materials' in place. Adequate teaching and learning materials for VET are largely absent, except for those provided by donors. The task of developing new curricula and teaching and learning materials for VET – and the required investment – is huge.

As regards VET teachers, a national Centre for Teacher Development exists but does not deal with VET. There are issues across the board – from initial VET teacher preparation at university level to the selection and recruitment of teachers, their proper induction at schools, and teachers' professional and career development systems. In 2021 the Faculty of Education of the University of Prishtina developed a Policy for Improvement and Quality Assurance in Teacher Preparation. No such policies or systems are in place for VET. Over time, some VET teachers have been trained through donor projects but only within pilot institutions. AVETAE coordinates teachers' continuous professional development for the six VET centres of competence for which it is in charge, but would need to be resourced to be centrally in charge of all VET schools.

The 'legal framework for quality assurance is considered complete' (MESTI, 2022b, p. 30), although VET requires specific criteria, norms and arrangements that should be regulated separately. Here, Kosovo could follow the EQAVET framework. Personnel to manage quality are lacking at all levels – from quality coordinators at MESTI, MEDs or schools, to inspectors as per the establishment plan

⁶ Information provided by Avni Gashi, then NQA Director, on 15.11.2022.

under the Law on the Education Inspectorate. There are no VET inspectors. Neither MESTI nor MEDs systematically collect and analyse specific qualitative indicators to inform their policies. Thus, the quality assurance system may be considered non-functional. Earlier efforts to train quality coordinators for VET schools at two different, recognised levels of competence would need to be sustained by selecting, training and sustainably funding such quality coordinators in all schools, alongside coordinators in charge of curriculum development, school-business liaison, teacher training, etc. If the initiated school assessment and development planning processes are to be meaningful, schools will require higher levels of autonomy and funding to be able to constantly improve.

To measure learning achievements, two national tests are organised every year: achievement tests at the end of the 9th grade and State Matura exams at the end of the 12th grade. Staff from MESTI's Division for Quality Assurance, Standards, Evaluation and Licensing have been trained and test items improved over time. MESTI (2022b) holds, however, that 'the main challenge is administering tests and preventing cheating in schools' (p. 31). Staff shortages again limit the capacity to analyse the results from national and international assessments and draw policy conclusions.

On 20 September 2022, the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) accepted the Kosovo Accreditation Agency's application for affiliate status. This decision may eventually facilitate the process of recognising graduates' diplomas in European countries and the exchange of students and professors.

Work-based learning arrangements

VET in Kosovo is insufficiently linked to the labour market, in terms of both VET offers and provision. The currently used subject-based curricula are not geared towards developing vocational skills. Where VET curricula have been updated and do contain practical learning elements, schools find it difficult to implement them. Schools generally lack the conditions, teacher skills, equipment, materials and structured cooperation with businesses to develop learners' practical skills.

MESTI's Regulation 135/2020 and Administrative Instruction 137/2020 regulate work-based learning. In order to put a work-based learning *system* in place, VET curricula would need to be changed, school-business liaison coordinators resourced in all schools, a structured cooperation with businesses created, support provided to train company instructors, etc. A new GIZ-GfA project (2022-2024) involves 10 VET schools and 1 VET centre of competence in nine municipalities. Company internships are planned to be offered to all of the approximately 5 000 11th- and 12th-grade students in all 58 profiles covered. Schools have already signed 600 memoranda of understanding with businesses and are working on placements. The project will also draft a model of a simplified and standardised WBL lesson plan and train professional teachers how to use it; develop training guidelines for companies on how to implement WBL; and deliver training for 10 school-business coordinators.

A subgroup of the high-level VET commission, set up by the Prime Minister's Office in March 2022, is discussing the introduction of (short-term) dual training, which the leading Besa Foundation is currently piloting with three profiles. Schemes are planned to be expanded in connection with the future EU Youth Guarantee scheme for young NEETs.

Kosovo is being encouraged to become part of the EU's European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA), of which other Western Balkan countries are already members.

Digital education and skills

While schools were closed during the pandemic, teachers were expected to move towards digital learning, for which they did not have adequate experience, learning platforms, materials or support. The lack of access to the internet, Wi-Fi, proper devices and online learning opportunities have not only led to further learning gaps among students, but also widened inequalities in education. This concerns in particular 'children with low socio-economic status, children with special educational needs and children from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) communities' (MESTI, 2022b, p. 23).

The 2020 Survey on the Use of Information and Communication Technology⁷ found that 96.4% of households in Kosovo had internet access. However, according to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019-2020⁸, only 53.4% of households had a computer (23.8% among RAE; 13.9% among the poorest families). While digital skills have not been assessed throughout Kosovo, students experiencing financial hardship and living in rural areas are said to have the lowest levels of digital competence (Shala and Grajevci, 2017).

The situation regarding the specific KESP objectives are as follows. Infrastructure (KESP objective 5.1): internet connectivity is missing in 1 058 schools. However, MESTI has a plan, and will allocate EUR 6.5 million each year for the next 3 years to progressively fill this gap. The target is to connect at least 250 schools each year. In addition, an average of 1 computer per 35 learners is insufficient. Loans and grants for hardware will be provided by the World Bank, and by IPA, GIZ, ADA and UNICEF, respectively. The availability of digital educational resources (KESP objective 5.2) presents another challenge, especially for VET, where almost no materials are available. Furthermore, the digital skills of educators (KESP objective 5.4) are seen as a key obstacle and would require needs analyses and the devising and provision of digital skills training for teachers and trainers. KESP foresees the use of [DIGCOMP EDU](#) as a reference framework for educators' digital skills. This tool could support self-assessment among teachers and help design a training package to improve educators' digital skills. Digital capacity of schools (KESP objective 5.3): KESP indicates [DIGCOM ORG](#) as a reference for the digital capacity of schools. In 2019, the European Training Foundation (ETF) and MESTI piloted the EU's SELFIE tool, which is already available in Albanian and Serbian. Applying SELFIE at a system-wide level could be a way to gather evidence of needs and foster digital innovation in schools, as a component of school development plans. In 2023, MESTI plans to create a division for digital education and hire 100 ICT coordinators in schools. Municipalities are expected to play a key role in the organisation of digital education.⁹

Statistics on education and training

MESTI's Education Management Information System (EMIS) allows for data on educational institutions to be collected and processed electronically, including data on attendees, staff and – to some extent – infrastructure. MEDs and the public educational institutions in turn do not use digital platforms and 'offer almost no digital services so far' (MESTI, 2022b, p. 46).

Between 2015 and 2017, work was done to develop the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), which allows users to follow enrolment trends. However, 'HEMIS lacks ongoing technical support to address barriers to data entry and does not generate data needed for analyses' (ibid, p. 44). At the same time, public higher education institutions use the Electronic Student Management System and the University Management System, while KAA runs the e-Accreditation platform.

There have been pilot initiatives in various VET schools to carry out tracer studies among VET graduates. However, no legal provisions governing these matters exist yet.

⁷ <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5804/anketa-e-p%C3%ABrdorimit-t%C3%AB-teknologjis%C3%AB-informative-komunikimit2020.pdf>.

⁸ https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5765/republic-of-kosovo-national-and-roma-ashkali-and-egyptian-communities-2019-20-mics-sfr_albanian.pdf.

⁹ Information obtained during an interview with Jusuf Thaçi, digital skills experts, and from Valbona Fetiu-Mjeku and Veton Alihajdari from MESTI's VET department on 22 September 2022.

3. LABOUR MARKET AND EMPLOYMENT

3.1 Trends and challenges

According to the European Commission's progress report of October 2022, 'Kosovo continues to face structural labour market challenges stemming from the skills mismatch, the rapid growth of the working-age population and job creation, and the persistently low participation of women and generally precarious employment opportunities (fewer than half of employees have permanent work contracts)' (EC, 2022b, p. 100).

Chronic weaknesses include:

- the low labour force participation; the low activity and employment rates, especially among women and young people; the high NEET rate; underemployment; and the low participation among older workers;
- the labour market functioning, including working arrangements; non-compliance with employment contracts; overtime work without compensation; the low transition from temporary to permanent contracts; and the lack of employment protection legislation. However, administrative data from the first half of 2022 showed a growth in formal employment;
- the lack of unemployment and health insurance and the partial lack of occupational safety measures for employed people – issues where Kosovo does not comply with the EU acquis communautaire;
- the low level of expenditure on active labour market policies (ALMPs), in comparison to the number and partly extensive needs of beneficiaries; the insufficient targeting of measures; the need for continuous capacity-building of employment service staff; and the high incidence of long-term unemployment, especially among low-skilled people;
- the lack of unemployment benefits, which may result in unemployed people falling into poverty;
- gender inequality in terms of employment and pay gaps; and
- the skills gap among unemployed people, including young people

(adapted from: Paun Jarallah and Rizvanolli, 2019, p. 40).

Labour market characteristics

Due to COVID-19-related disruptions, annual data for 2021 of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) were released in December 2022 only. Data stem from the period before economic recovery gained full momentum and should further improve for 2022. LFS 2021 data show that, among working-age Kosovars (15-65 age group):

- inactivity reached 60.7%, with the female rate as high as 78.9% and the lower male rate at 43.4%. In other words, only 39.3% of working-age Kosovars participated in the labour force;
- the employment rate amounted to 31.3%. Kosovo observed the highest gains in the employment rate among the six Western Balkan countries between 2020 and 2021, thanks to the high number of formal jobs added. Nevertheless, this remains the lowest employment rate among the six Western Balkan countries;
- there continues to be a stark gender employment gap, the largest in Europe, with the male rate reaching 45.9% and the female rate staying as low as 16.5%, however on a decreasing trend from 39.4 percentage points in 2017. Among the reasons is the lower involvement of women in entrepreneurship, which is linked to lower access to finance and property, as well as family responsibilities and the lack of affordable early childhood education and care facilities. In September 2021, as part of the government's economic recovery package, maternity leave was introduced for women who have been unemployed for longer than 12 months. Excluding women in

shorter spells of unemployment could act as a disincentive for women planning motherhood to engage in (formal) work;

- there are considerable gender stereotypes in employment. Women are mainly employed in the education, trade and healthcare sectors (51.8% of all female employees), while men are mainly employed in the trade, construction and manufacturing sectors (41.8% of all male employees);
- 43.5% of employed persons have permanent contracts for their main jobs, while 56.5% have temporary contracts;
- the unemployment rate reached 20.6%. Unemployment was higher among women with a rate of 25.0%, compared to the male rate of 19.0%;
- youth unemployment among the 15-24 age group was the highest in the Western Balkan region, at 38.0% (KAS¹⁰).

See the attached Statistical Annex for the EU monitoring indicators where we have recalculated the labour market indicators for the age group 20-64.

Employment shares by sector of activity in Kosovo (averages for 2016-2020) were 67.4% for services, 28.2% for industry and 4.5% for agriculture. The service sector consists primarily of low-skilled traditional services, such as transportation and storage, the wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food. While the service sector has contributed to more job opportunities, it generally has low potential for innovation and for reducing productivity gaps compared with advanced economies (World Bank, 2022c, p. 22-24).

Statistics on the labour market and employment

Since 2012, KAS has been carrying out labour force surveys following EUROSTAT standards and methodologies. However, it is widely known that some people work despite declaring themselves inactive or unemployed. Kosovo needs to address the issue of informality as a priority concern.

The Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK) maintains a sophisticated IT-based labour market information system (LMIS)¹¹, containing rich data on jobseekers, unemployed people, employers, vacancies, ALMPs and job mediation outcomes. Challenges include a more user-friendly presentation, analyses, and the actual use of LMIS data. Some statistics, such as the characteristics of long-term unemployment and regional labour markets in Kosovo, are still missing. A dashboard of indicators in real time, as well as periodical statistics, reports and analyses, could assist individuals and employers in obtaining information on labour market needs and in job searching and matching. Furthermore, the LMIS could help the government to review and shape employment and training policies, including the development of new sectors and professions (Paun Jarallah & Rizvanolli, 2019, p. 19 and p. 75 et seq.).

Kosovo participates in the European Skills and Jobs survey, which is implemented by the ETF and follows CEDEFOP's methodology tested for the EU-27.

3.2 Employment policy and institutional settings

Strategy and legal framework in the employment policy field

A new National Employment Strategy is being drafted, which follows the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers' sector strategy for 2018-2022. This strategy has only partly been implemented.

The Labour Law has been revised, and public consultations completed in November 2022, which will also re-regulate the EARK's operations and services.

¹⁰ Data quoted from: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/labour-force-survey-lfs-in-kosovo-2021>.

¹¹ See <https://sitp.rks-gov.net/>.

In preparation for the implementation of the EU Youth Guarantee scheme, the EARK amended its regulation governing the registration of jobseekers.

Initiatives to boost employment

The World Bank states: ‘spending on social services and labour market programmes is disproportionately low. Benefits are not always adequate and may cause, in some cases, disincentives to work. [...] A lack of case management and referral systems, as well as low spending, make social services and labour market programmes largely ineffective’ (World Bank, 2022a, p. 8).

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) cover: vocational training; public works; wage subsidies; on-the-job training and internships; and entrepreneurship support. The most prominent ALMPs include on-the-job training, internships and vocational training provided by VTCs, while beneficiary numbers are rather low for public works and self-employment support. Due to the fact that Government support during the pandemic was linked to people’s registration with the EARK, ‘in 2020 the number of registered unemployed people during the year exceeded 168,980, compared to 70,790 in 2019’ (RCC, 2022, p. 5).

The number of registered unemployed jobseekers decreased to 82 042 in 2021 (EARK, 2022, p. 12), which is a decline of -51.4% over the previous year but still remains above pre-pandemic levels. What is worrisome is the fact that the majority of these people (37 410, or 45.6%) are jobseekers without qualifications (p. 13). The EARK registered a total of 10 743 job vacancies in 2021 – a decrease of 3.8% compared to 2020 (p. 17), most of which were in the ‘trade and repair of automobiles and household goods’ sector (21.1%), followed by the manufacturing industry (17.6%) (p. 18).

In 2021, the EARK managed to include 6 252 registered unemployed jobseekers in ALMPs, which is fewer than in 2020 (6 961) and the all-time peak in 2019 (8 711). Coverage rates were as high as 12.4% in 2019, a mere 4.1% in the exceptional year 2020, and 7.6% in 2021 (ibid, p. 24). Considering that few jobseekers register with the EARK, the extent of the challenge is clear.

The World Bank summarises the challenges as follows:

- ‘ALMPs are not well resourced and do not partner with NGOs, civil society or the private sector;
- EARK has low implementation capacity;
- Programming decisions are not based on labour market and jobseeker data and information;
- Codified monitoring and evaluation standards for data-driven reporting have largely not been implemented;
- There are no unemployment benefits to support workers who lost their employment’ (World Bank, 2022b, p. 9).

The World Bank concludes that ‘there is an inevitable need to:

- Increase public resources for ALMPs and allow partnerships with non-public providers.
- Strengthen the capacity of the EARK by hiring and training counsellors, including for employer outreach, proactive case management and specialized support for vulnerable groups;
- Base programming decisions on labour market and jobseeker data and information;
- Establish rigorous monitoring and evaluation;
- Assess options for temporary financial support for those actively searching for jobs (unemployment benefits)’ (ibid, p. 9).

In July 2021, Kosovo endorsed the Western Balkans Declaration on ensuring sustainable labour market integration of young people (15-29).¹² It has prepared a first Youth Guarantee (YG)

¹² <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/youth-policy-western-balkans-part-innovation-agenda-western-balkans/related-links-rex-553>

Implementation Plan, which the Government intends to adopt soon. The Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers (MFLT) will oversee implementation. The EARK will take charge of the YG service delivery system and the YG monitoring framework. MESTI will intensify actions related to ‘early interventions’ – or preventing young people from becoming NEETs. MESTI will also upgrade the Education Management Information System to include data on the YG. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport will coordinate initiatives related to outreach, in partnership with NGOs. The first year of implementing the Plan will focus on carrying out further research or mapping, among others, to obtain a better profile of the NEET population and analyse skills and job opportunities in Kosovo’s provinces, to prepare the groundwork from the point of view of legislation and readiness of EARK staff, and to pilot the monitoring of NEETs in YG measures in two provinces.

Initiatives to increase the capacity of the public employment services

The EARK is an independent body within the MFLT. Its mandate includes the provision of employment services to jobseekers and employers; the administration and implementation of ALMPs; the provision of labour migration counselling; the payment of maternity leave compensation; and determining the proof of unemployment status as a condition for access to social assistance.

Its organisational structure consists of the Head Office located in Pristina and a network of 34 municipal employment offices, 7 vocational training centres (VTCs) and 7 career orientation centres in each region. The EARK currently employs 228 full-time staff. During the lockdown period, a new web application was launched to register unemployed jobseekers and vacancies.

A peer review among public employment services of the six Western Balkan economies highlighted as strengths of the EARK ‘the clearly defined process of institutional target-setting and key performance indicators’, as well as the digitised operational processes via a system called SIMP. Another plus is ‘the profiling and segmentation of clients’ according to their needs and individual strengths. Peers also praised the fact that ‘the training provided by VTCs is embedded in the EARK system’, which ‘makes the process of allocating jobseekers to training straightforward and quick’ (RCC, 2022, p. 5). However, the latter could also be a disadvantage, as VTCs typically offer cheap, short training with a lack of focus on practical skills. There is no open competition to involve other training providers. This would involve higher administrative but also training costs, for which resources are lacking. Funds are also insufficient for higher-level, more intense training.

In terms of challenges, the report suggests that staff awareness be raised on issues of quality management; that counsellors cover services in a more integrated manner, from drafting individual employment plans to placing jobseekers in ALMPs; and that ALMPs be regularly evaluated for their quality and effectiveness in terms of jobseekers’ labour market integration. The EARK’s relations with employers also need to be strengthened through better communication with the business community. Improved (online) services for matching job vacancies and jobseekers’ profiles may induce more employers to register their vacancies with the EARK (ibid, p. 5).

The EARK faces major challenges in implementing the YG scheme. The EARK has projected extra demand for some 100 staff, but the pending laws on civil servants and public officials are preventing it from recruiting external talent. Other challenges include continuous capacity-building among EARK staff; the introduction of a three-tiered new service model (from low to high levels of support) and the re-organisation of local employment offices; the review and improvement of databases; effective outreach and NEET profiling strategies; and the registration and monitoring of, and expansion of offers to, NEETs. Top-level government support and long-term funding commitments would be needed for that.

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STATISTICAL ANNEX – KOSOVO

	EU monitoring indicators	2015	2019	2020	2021	EU (2021b)
1	Share of early school leavers (% aged 18-24)	14.5	8.2	7.8	7.0	9.7
	<i>Female</i>	17.5	8.4	8.4	7.0	12.6
2	Share of those aged 20-29 with low educational level (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
3	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
4	Share of those aged 25-34 with high educational level (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
5	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
6	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
7	Not in employment/education/training (NEET) aged 15-29	39.2	39.9	40.4	36.6	13.1
	<i>Inactive</i>	28.0	26.8	29.6	29.0	8.2
	<i>Unemployed</i>	11.1	13.1	10.8	7.7	4.9
	<i>Male</i>	33.7	35.6	38.0	34.5	11.8
	<i>Male inactive</i>	18.5	20.3	24.8	25.2	6.3
	<i>Male unemployed</i>	15.3	15.2	13.2	9.3	5.5
	<i>Female</i>	45.3	44.8	43.0	39.0	14.5
	<i>Female inactive</i>	38.9	34.0	34.9	33.1	10.2
	<i>Female unemployed</i>	6.5	10.8	8.1	5.9	4.3
8	Youth employment rate (% aged 15-24)	8.5	13.1	11.4	13.4	32.7
	<i>Female</i>	3.7	7.1	6.4	8.0	30.3
9	Employment rate of tertiary graduates aged 20-34	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	79.6
10	Employment rate of ISCED 3-4 VET graduates aged 20-34	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	76.4
11	Employment rate (% aged 20-64)	29.1	34.2	32.3	35.1	73.1

EU monitoring indicators		2015	2019	2020	2021	EU (2021b)
	<i>Female</i>	13.2	15.6	16.0	18.5	67.7
12	Youth unemployment rate (% aged 15-24)	57.7	49.4	49.1	38.0	16.6
	<i>Female</i>	67.2	60.3	57.2	46.5	16.7
13	Unemployment rate (% aged 15+)	32.8	25.5	25.7	20.6	7.0
	<i>Female</i>	36.5	34.4	32.2	25.0	7.4
14	Lifelong learning during past 4 weeks (% aged 25-64)	4.9	2.7	5.6	M.D.	10.8
	<i>Low educational level (ISCED 0-2)</i>	0.1	0.1	0.8	M.D.	4.3
	<i>Unemployed</i>	1.0	0.3	0.9	M.D.	12.7

Sources: Kosovo Agency for Statistics, Eurostat

Notes: M.D. = missing data

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