



## **Higher Education in Kosovo: Major Changes, Reforms and Development Trends at University of Prishtina and University of Mitrovica and their role in peace building and reconciliation during post-conflict period**

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### **Abstract**

Education system in Kosovo went through tremendous and courageous developments since June 1999, when conflict in Kosovo ended. Although Higher Education experienced essential reforms, there are pro et contra arguments whether substantial or superficial reforms took place during this past eight-year period of time. The reform process is underway, but it will take more time until it delivers a quality product, i.e. skilful and competitive students for the open market and an environment which is free of disagreements of the past and where peace building reconciliation are deeply rooted in the society. As the push for reform came from international stakeholders, local players still strive for ownership of the process as a way to drive it further. Steps have been made, but results are yet to be seen.

The overall political developments have been reflected in higher education system in Kosovo as well. While Kosovo status is yet to be settled, the higher

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education system in Kosovo did not play a very strong role in assisting peace building and promoting reconciliation. Although the statements of all higher education authorities highlight the need for promoting peace and reconciliation for a stable environment in the region, practices in the ground show that public higher education providers have not been very successful in bridging the gap created from the conflict between Albanians and Serbs.

The University of Prishtina remains totally controlled by Albanians without any Serb students, but which gathers students from other local communities, such as: Bosnian, Turkish, Roma, Egyptians and Ashkali. It has also made efforts to initiate Bologna Declaration-related reforms, even though it is not officially part of the process yet. The University of Mitrovica is located in Kosovo North and is totally controlled by Serbs, and operates according to curricula of the Universities in Serbia proper. It does not have any Albanian students, but it gathers students from Serbian-speaking communities: Bosnian, Gorani, and Roma.

Considering the recent history of Kosovo, where Serbian Regime and ethnic Kosovo Albanians fought one another to keep/take control over the region, the higher education system in Kosovo still remains divided along ethnic lines. The two public institutions of higher education that are operational in post-war Kosovo – Albanian-controlled University of Prishtina and Serbian-controlled University of Mitrovica – have yet to develop into institutions which provide education for all ethnic groups, where both would attract and welcome students from all ethnicities. Also many more private institutions of higher education flourished during 2004-2005, which got licences from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology of Kosovo but still have no accreditation due to a non-functioning Accreditation Agency in Kosovo. The two public universities also have not been accredited yet, and furthermore they are not officially part of the Bologna Process due to many difficulties and challenges, primarily as a result of a lacking strong Accreditation Agency.

This paper will address all the above issues, and will focus on presenting the challenges and prospects of University of Prishtina and University of Mitrovica in developing into modern, open-minded, cohesive institutions, which would promote peace building and reconciliation to give hope for all communities for living in a

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conducive and friendly environment. The entire region has suffered from many wars and only well-educated individuals and violence-free minds can contribute to a stable region and wider. This is the role that higher education can play in the future, and this is what local communities expect from them.

**Author's Note:** This paper was revised lately due to recent declaration of independence of Kosovo, and its recognition by 29 countries so far, including the major Contact Group countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy.

***Introduction***

Education system in Kosovo went through tremendous and courageous developments since June 1999, when conflict in Kosovo ended. Although Higher Education experienced essential reforms, there are pro et contra arguments whether substantial or superficial reforms took place during this past eight-year period of time. The reform process is underway, but it will take more time until it delivers a quality product, i.e. skilful and competitive students for the open market and an environment which is free of disagreements of the past and where peace building and reconciliation are deeply rooted in the society. As the push for reform came from international stakeholders, local players still strive for ownership of the process as a way to drive it further. Steps have been made, but results are yet to be seen.

The overall political developments have been reflected in higher education system in Kosovo as well. While Kosovo status is yet to be settled, the higher education system in Kosovo did not play a very strong role in assisting peace building and promoting reconciliation. Although the statements of all higher education authorities highlight the need for promoting peace and reconciliation for a stable environment in the region, practices in the ground show that public higher education providers have not been very successful in bridging the gap created from the conflict between Albanians and Serbs.

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This paper will address all the above issues, and will focus on presenting the challenges and prospects of University of Prishtina and University of Mitrovica in developing into modern, open-minded, cohesive institutions, which would promote peace building and reconciliation to give hope for all communities for living in a conducive and friendly environment. The entire region has suffered from many wars and only well-educated individuals and violence-free minds can contribute to a stable region and wider. This is the role that higher education can play in the future, and this is what local communities expect from them.

***Historical Background***

The current situation in higher education in Kosovo cannot be understood without a broad knowledge of the former educational system in Kosovo and its transition. The



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first institutions of higher education in Kosovo appeared between 1958 and 1969, but until 1970, when the University of Prishtina was founded, they functioned within the University of Belgrade (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001). At the beginning, the University of Prishtina consisted of 4 faculties, but, by 1990, the University grew to be an institution of 13 faculties and 7 higher schools (Hyseni, Salihaj, Shatri, & Pupovci, 2000). Higher schools offered subject-based courses of 2 years studies leading to the degree of primary school teacher (Pupovci, 2002). Until the so-called “interim measures” were introduced to the University in 1990, resulting in appointment of Serbs to all senior positions, the language of instruction was Albanian and Serbian (Hyseni et al. 2000). Within half a year all Albanian professors and students were expelled or had left the University (OECD, 2001).

During the nineties Kosovo ran its own parallel education system, and because of this it is sometimes referred to as “the world’s largest NGO” (OECD, 2001, p. 13). However, the University of Prishtina continued to operate during nineties in its official premises but under control of Serbs providing education for non-Albanian speaking communities. During 2000/2001 the University of Prishtina operated based on an interim Statute drafted by the international educational leaders (United Nations Mission in Kosovo [UNMIK], 2000). The new Statute of the University of Prishtina provides that the academic units of the University are Faculties and Faculties of Applied Sciences (University of Prishtina, 2004). All the Faculties are Prishtina-based apart from the Faculty of Education which also has branches in Gjilan, Prizren, and Gjakova. The Faculties of Applied Sciences is the new name for the former higher technical schools which turned into Faculties after the merging of the higher schools into faculties. They are based in Peja, Mitrovica, and Ferizaj. Based on the Statute, 14 faculties and 3 faculties of applied sciences are operational as part of the University of Prishtina and they are scattered in all main Kosovo regions, with heavier presence in Prishtina (University of Prishtina, 2004). The University of Prishtina offers Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate studies (Pupovci, 2000) and the languages of instruction are Albanian and other official languages in Kosovo (University of Prishtina, 2004).



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The University of Mitrovica, on the other hand, is a “new” public higher education institution operating as of 1999, but its existence can be explained differently depending on the perspective it is looked at. At the outset, it has to be noted that UNMIK assisted in the establishment and development of the University of Mitrovica during early years of post-conflict period, i.e. 2000-2002 (European University Association [EUA], 2002). Thus, UNMIK was the authority that recognized the University of Mitrovica as a public higher education institution providing higher education for Kosovo North communities. The University of Mitrovica has nine faculties and operates in northern part of Mitrovica, in Zubin Potok and Leposavic, an area mainly inhabited by Kosovo Serbs (EUA, 2002). On the contrary, the University in the north names itself differently from the official name given by UNMIK authorities. In the official website of the university, the name is University of Prishtina with its seat in Kosovska Mitrovica. Thus, they consider itself as a continuation of the University of Prishtina from the period prior to 1999, when the University of Prishtina was run and controlled by Serbs. The Kosovo Ministry of Education did not recognize the University of Mitrovica for a long time, considering it as a parallel illegal institution. Also, they did not have access to the University of Mitrovica at all, and as such it is not envisioned for any development in the strategy for the development of higher education 2005-2015 (MEST, 2004). Currently, the University of Mitrovica has accreditation from UNMIK (EUA, 2007).

***Declaration of Bologna***

Following the conflict in Kosovo the access to European education developments was possible mainly through the heavy presence of the International Community in Kosovo. The doors to the wider world opened, as the Kosovo education system made efforts to catch up with the new developments in the European context. The adoption of Bologna Declaration was the first step taken by the University of Prishtina in order to keep the pace with the higher education in other European countries. In March 2000, the University of Prishtina established the Committee for Strategy and Reforms – later known as Bologna Working Group – which would follow the implications of the Bologna Declaration on higher education (Beqiri, 2003).



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The adjustment of study programmes on all levels, with the objectives of the Bologna process and full implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), are two of the goals to be achieved in next ten years in higher education (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology [MEST], 2004). The adoption of a system of recognisable and comparable undergraduate and graduate degrees in order to promote the employability of the European citizens and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system is one of the main objectives of the Bologna Declaration (Beqiri, 2003). The Bologna Declaration also provides that a system of credits, known as ECTS, must be established as a means of promoting the mobility of students from one country to another (Beqiri, 2003).

The Kosovo Assembly has passed the Law on Higher Education, which happens to be the first law on higher education in Europe that is based on the Bologna Declaration (Beqiri, 2003). As such, the local professors involved in the process consider the law, mainly drafted by the experts of the Council of Europe with suggestions from local educational experts, to be the best one on higher education in the region (Beqiri, 2003). However, the Law on Higher Education was signed by the Special Representative of the Secretary General, with some delays due to disagreements between UNMIK and Kosovo institutions on the Law, primarily in relation to the recognition of University of Mitrovica as a higher education institution (MEST, 2004). The University of Mitrovica still seems to be outside developments in relation to the Bologna process.

***Major Changes***

Isolation during nineties made it impossible for Kosovo education system to absorb major changes in terms of didactics, teaching practices, and pedagogy as it was the case with some former European communist countries (OECD, 2001). The World University Service (WUS) was the main player in supporting academic staff and students at the University of Prishtina during 1999, the first year after the conflict (Leutloff & Pichl, 1999). By the end of the year and by beginning of 2000, the number of international organisations working on education sector increased tremendously. Actually, Kosovo education had never before been more exposed to the assistance of



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the international organisations, which involved in any aspect and level of education, providing a wide variety of programmes starting from kindergartens up to the University or Ministry of Education. However, the University of Mitrovica did not benefit much from this presence as the university looked more towards Belgrade, receiving both curricula and funding from the Serbian Ministry of Education.

The University of Prishtina went through many changes since 1999. The adoption of the Bologna Declaration and implementation by some faculties of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) are considered as the major changes that took place during past five years (MEST, 2003). With these two steps, it was the first time in years that the University of Prishtina made a move towards new qualitative changes. The University of Mitrovica, on the other hand, has not adopted the Bologna system yet, and as such it is still not part of the Bologna process. However, with the resolution of Kosovo status, the University of Prishtina has better chances to become part of the Bologna, while for the University of Mitrovica, it has to recognise Kosovo institutions first, in order to benefit from them, and then to work towards meeting the requirements for being part of the international developments. The EUA (2002) found that the University of Mitrovica looks with nostalgia towards the past, and appealed to the university to consider international cooperation as a central role of its mission.

In addition, a new Faculty of Education is in place as part of the University of Prishtina, emerging from the existing higher schools in Prishtina and other Kosovo regions. Kosovo Educator Development Project (KEDP) financed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) provided the greatest push, support, and energy for establishing the Faculty of Education, which will be an institution for providing pre-service training for the future teachers in Kosovo (Pupovci, 2002). He also highlights the input of KEDP in providing in-service training for teachers and professors and putting in place trainer training programmes for teachers, professors, school directors and others involved in education. Sommers and Buckland (2004) claim that the Faculty of Education was a success as part of the wider teacher-development strategy.

The changes at the University of Mitrovica are still insignificant compared to the developments at the University of Prishtina. The EUA (2002) found that both students



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and professors at the University of Mitrovica were still nostalgic about the times when they were located in Prishtina. The EUA also found that teaching and learning process in the university were very traditional, i.e. teachers standing in front of students lecturing them all the time, without any interaction or teaching aids that would make learning more pleasant and practical for students.

***Reforms, Internally or Externally-driven?***

The Kosovo case of educational reforms is special. The reform did not start from the internal need of the University of Prishtina or University of Mitrovica but it came as a push from the international players. Educational reforms in Kosovo were planned and run by the international community instead of local experts as is usually the case in other countries (Rexhaj, 2001). Thus, the reform caught many University professors by surprise and unprepared for the “burden” put on them. As the reform came into being driven by external players, Rexhaj (2001) appeals for inclusion of local university staff and policy makers in planning and implementing reforms in Kosovo.

Sommers and Buckland (2004) reveal that gaps existed in the communication channels between UNMIK and University professors when it came to the implementation of the reform. They show that University of Prishtina professors did not know the United Nations system, because the United Nations officials did not introduce it to them. This created a lot of confusion, because the University professors felt as strangers in an environment which was supposed to belong to them.

Another problem that Sommers & Buckland (2004) noted is that the reform started from zero point, because UNMIK wanted to put in place a brand new education system, considering that the existing education system inherited from the past, did not provide basis for a sound reform. This added to the tension between locals and internationals. The University professors remained as outsiders in the process of reforms despite the fact that they had contributed and sacrificed a lot in keeping the higher education “alive” during the previous decade. Not crediting them for that, may have been the biggest mistake committed by the international educational players.

The reform in the University of Prishtina went in three main directions: curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment (Mustafa et al., 2004).

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Their interviews with University lecturers show that 84% of them perceived further changes in the curriculum as urgent. In terms of teaching and learning styles, Mustafa et al. (2004) found that traditional teaching and learning strategies dominate during lectures, with the teacher-centred direct instruction being the most often applied method. Although, local and international organisations provided much training on teaching styles for University professors so far, they still heavily stick to their old methods. They are calling for more training on new teaching techniques, although 60% of the University lecturers interviewed admitted to have gone through some training during past two years (Mustafa et al., 2004). This is a concern, considering the fact that the number of international organisations working on the sector is dropping. Many of them have either completed or are about to complete their projects in Kosovo.

Since 1999, the University of Prishtina is a member of the European Universities Association (EUA). The EUA has given a great assistance to the University of Prishtina, thus, accelerating and improving the reform process, by financing study visits abroad for the professors and students of the University of Prishtina “in order to advance the new teaching methods, develop curriculum for different faculties, and realise the reform process” (Beqiri, 2003, p. 4).

The situation in the University of Mitrovica is different as it did not benefit the same as the University of Prishtina from the international presence. During a site visit to the University of Mitrovica, the EUA (2002) found that the students lack basic learning materials such as textbooks, information and communication technology, or equipped laboratories. According to the EUA, the lack of communication of the University of Mitrovica professors and students with their colleagues and peers in the world is a serious hindrance for the university to be part of the reforms taking place in the wider world. However time constraints, lack of funds, and insufficient skills of many stakeholders hamper the reforms in public higher education system in Kosovo (OECD, 2001).

Many researchers so far have emphasised the need for ownership of the reform process in Kosovo education by locals. The OECD (2001) highlights this need by calling for involvement of local institutions and stakeholders, teachers and professors in particular, in planning and implementing the reforms. The OECD (2001) would also

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argue that there should be a better explanation for the locals about what is meant, or what is represented with “the new European standards” (p. 38) in order that they are better grasped. The inability to cope with the new developments has left many University professors in distress. As long as the University professors are not in complete control of the reform process, they will be more prone to stick to their own old methods and undermine the work of the internationals.

The lack of funds and the low salaries have an effect on staff development within the universities. The findings of Mustafa et al. (2004) show that approximately 50% of professors of most of the Faculties of the University of Prishtina have an additional job. To make professional development of professors even more obscure, 25% of professors have additional jobs that are not related or only remotely related to what they do at the University (Mustafa et al. 2004). Mustafa et al. (2004) also show that University professors themselves are very critical about their work. They state that no research is undertaken in almost all faculties, with professors concentrating on teaching as their main and only activity. The University of Mitrovica faces another problem: their teaching staff mostly comprises of visiting professors from the universities based in Serbia.

***Development Trends***

According to the Law on Higher Education, the objectives of higher education among others are, “to establish, develop, protect, and transmit knowledge through teaching and scientific work and research” (MEST, 2002, p. 5). The Law enables the higher education providers to draft their own statutes and to organise and develop study programmes on higher education. Despite this, it is the MEST which is entitled to licence any higher education provider and control their statutes. However, all the statutes of any higher education provider must get the approval of the Kosovo Assembly, as the higher-decision making body in Kosovo (MEST, 2002).

Currently, the University of Prishtina provides education only to full-time students. However, the Law on higher education describes the modes of study, which can be “full-time, part-time, by distance-learning, and any combination of these modes” (MEST, 2002, p. 6). At the time when this paper is being written, the University of



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Prishtina is planning to start with the part-time students for the academic year 2004/2005. The areas of studies will be limited, but it is going to be an opportunity for the University to generate more income because part-time students will pay higher tuition fees than full-time students.

The new Statute of the University of Prishtina provides that the University of Prishtina aims to be a leading centre in the advancement of knowledge, ideas and science in higher education (University of Prishtina, 2004). Also one of the main objectives of the University is to engage in regional and international educational activities, as well as to fully integrate into the European Area of Higher Education based on the provisions of the Bologna Declaration (University of Prishtina, 2004). One of the concerns is that the new Statute of the University of Prishtina seems to favour “knowledge” over “skills.” This was the weakness of the education system in Kosovo so far, and obviously we still have a long way to go to overcome it.

MEST (2004) clarifies the vision for higher education for Kosovo, “where knowledge and scientific research are in function of a sustainable cultural, social, and economic development” (p. 6). During the coming years, MEST pledges to work intensively on provision of legal frameworks, further reformation, and fund raising for a better higher education in Kosovo. According to MEST (2004) the problems in higher education are inherited from the ten years of isolation during 1990-1999, while the greatest challenge for the higher education is to establish the link with the economy and to create a mechanism to track down the employability of its graduates. The EUA also found the same lacking link between the university and economy in the University of Mitrovica (2002). For the University of Mitrovica the situation is even gloomier, since the local population in the north live in dire economic circumstances and economy is almost non-existent.

Human resources are the greatest capital in Kosovo, but they are disregarded and not properly managed. Yet, the number of students enrolling to university is much lower than the demand. Each year, the University of Prishtina admits around 5 000 students, while the number of those who submit application is six times higher (Mustafa et al., 2004). Apart from the role that the University of Prishtina must play in economic development, it should also play the role of the social agent for democratisation of the



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country (MEST, 2004). On the other hand, the University of Mitrovica is considered by local residents as a vital source of employment for the region, but the same as the University of Prishtina, it did not contribute much so far on democratization of the country as their role of social agent was not fully operational.

***UP and UM role in peace building and reconciliation***

Considering the Kosovo political context and locations in which the two public higher education providers – the University of Prishtina and the University of Mitrovica – operate, their role in peace-building and reconciliation was not satisfactory. Their very existence is a result of a lacking reconciliation between Albanian majority and Serb minority in Kosovo. If there was reconciliation, there would be no need for the University of Mitrovica as such, since students of all groups would be studying at the University of Prishtina. However, there is nothing wrong with the existence of two public higher education institutions – the problem is that they are serving Kosovo communities' needs separately, and thus not contributing much in peace-building and reconciliation, which is usually a strong need for progressive developments in any post-conflict society.

The international administration in Kosovo led by UNMIK played a positive role by providing access to higher education for Kosovo Serbs through recognition of the University of Mitrovica. Thus, many students could continue studies in their native language, an opportunity that would be difficult to find otherwise. The University of Prishtina provides education for the Albanian majority, but it also gathers students from other communities such as Bosniaks and Turkish – especially in the Faculty of Education branch in Prizren. However, Dewey (1897), almost a century ago, rightly noted that education is the fundamental method for social progress and reform. Kosovo communities have to get rid of the past, and look towards future, in order that a cohesive society is established and social progress is marked consistently.

With the declaration of independence on 17 March 2008 and its subsequent recognition, the Republic of Kosovo will have to implement the Ahtissari Comprehensive Proposal for Kosovo Status Settlement. Article 7 in Ahtisaari's proposal lists the rights of Serb community to education and envisions improvement of

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University of Mitrovica in order that it meets the needs of local population (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2007). Ahtisaari plan envisions that the a new statute is developed for the University of Mitrovica in cooperation with the international education experts, and it also proposes establishment of a nine-member Board that would run the University. With the implementation of Ahtisaari's package, maybe the University of Mitrovica will be more open for collaboration with other educational authorities, inside and outside Kosovo.

After the declaration of independence, the University of Mitrovica students started to organize protests in opposition to the independence. They consider Kosovo part of Serbia, and want to have the presence of Serbian state in Kosovo. The University of Prishtina students also organised many demonstrations during the post-conflict period in Kosovo, appealing for declaration of independence. While there are totally different viewpoints in Prishtina and Kosovo north about what the political status of Kosovo should be, the public higher education providers will yield little to boost peace building and reconciliation process. Both groups of students and university leadership continue to remain divided along their ethnic lines, even though University of Prishtina leadership is open to and welcomes all communities, thus depriving themselves from playing a more positive role in peace-building and reconciliation.

***Conclusion***

The developments that took and are taking place at the University of Prishtina indicate the will of local stakeholders, with valuable support of the internationals, to advance reforms. The University of Mitrovica has still to decide about the path it wants to follow – it can open up to the world by cooperating with Prishtina authorities and international community or continue to remain in isolation and rely on Belgrade solely. The University of Prishtina and the University of Mitrovica not only need reforms to change themselves, but they need reforms to develop into competitive institutions of higher education in Kosovo and region. Supporting the education of “brand new” professors for the needs of the University of Prishtina and the University of Mitrovica should be one of the priorities for government structures and University leaders.



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Education plays a crucial role in transformation of societies, if the education is of a good quality. The University of Prishtina and the University of Mitrovica have to fully embrace reforms, open up to the international educational developments and provide a high quality education that helps youth become competitive in the job market in the region and wider. As long as universities try to push forth nationalistic agendas, the opportunities for peace-building and reconciliation remain limited. But if they embrace integrative agendas and teach based on democratic approaches, the seeds of peace-building and reconciliation may be spread faster and Kosovo will become a society that everyone wants it to be: democratic, multi-ethnic, and tolerant where each and every individual is free and enjoys full rights as guaranteed by international conventions. There is still a lot to be done, but efforts should be made constantly to increase education quality so that Kosovo higher education is soon in line with the European Area of Higher Education.



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