DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN KOSOVO HIGHER EDUCATION - SYSTEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

Research Report

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Introduction

*Global challenges*

As soon as quality assurance was recognized as one of the major concerns in Higher Education, the concept started being reflected in legislations, policy making at national level and quality assurance agencies’ provisions. At a later stage quality assurance policy and practice managed to substantially influence institutional priorities and focuses, independently of external quality assurance reviews having formal and financial consequences or not.

The concept of quality in higher education has become an increasingly important matter for institutions, as well as for public policy and debates on education. Quality assurance has been used for the overall improvement of institutions and their management. As the demand for higher education has increased, so has the demand for its accountability, reliability and value for money (Harvey and Askling, 1965). Institutions are responsible for the internal management of their own quality and the effective establishment of procedures which monitor this. Nationally, quality assurance agencies provide an external evaluation of the institution and/or its programs. From country to country the mechanisms can vary and how quality is achieved and monitored can be very different. However, institutions now face much larger competition from other institutions and providers, both at home and abroad. In order to attract more students, institutions are under the constant pressure of having to maintain their quality, standards, reputation and especially the student experience they provide.

Quality assurance agencies have the responsibility to institutions and the public to assure that the education and experience providers deliver is of a good standard, in order to maintain trust in the education system nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, quality assurance review mechanisms provide valuable recommendations to how institutions can enhance their provision. Undoubtedly, quality assurance has seen many improvements since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. However there are many challenges still remaining. Many external quality assurance mechanisms still do not manage to take a holistic view of quality (EHEA, 2012).

In practice, we can observe that a high number of higher education institutions across Europe perceive the external quality assurance evaluations as checklist procedures instead of treating them as an opportunity to enhance and continuously develop their internal processes as a part of “a participative culture inside the institution” (Bergan, 2011).

*The national context in Kosovo*

In 2008, on the basis of the Law on Higher Education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) made the decision to create the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) with the authority to act as a public, independent agency responsible for assessing and promoting quality in higher education in Kosovo.

Since its establishment, KAA has been actively involved in supporting higher education to transform itself through the implementation of reforms and the increasing awareness of the importance of quality and quality assurance.
KAA has hence received the mandate to carry out the accreditation and reaccreditation of public and private institutions of higher education, and their academic and research programmes, and, secondly, to perform follow-up of the quality at the accredited institutions. At that time a proliferation of (private) HEIs was taking place. The first round of evaluations in 2009 harmonized the field of higher education further. Up till the beginning of 2014 some 380 evaluation reports have been accepted by the National Quality Council (NQC) as basis for accreditation. NQC also accepts evaluation reports from international QA-agencies that operate in Kosovo with the condition that they are ENQA members.

The legal duties of KAA also include setting guidelines and quality standards for accreditation; developing instruments for reviewing on a regular basis whether these requirements are met by accredited institutions; participating actively in international cooperation projects in the field of accreditation; quality assurance and submitting an annual report on its own activities to the Minister and to the Assembly.

The principles underpinning the work of KAA, as determined by the Law, include, among others, maintaining international quality standards, collaboration of international experts, orientation towards educational policy developments in Kosovo and Europe and cooperation with international partners, in order to become a member of international networks and panels in the field of quality assurance. Decisions are to be made independently and justified in a consistent and verifiable manner. Accountability to the public and political decision makers should be observed by means of an effective information policy.

KAA’s primary activities concern:

- The accreditation of public and private institutions of higher education;
- The accreditation of new institutions of higher education and their programmes (preliminary accreditation);
- The accreditation of new programmes at those institutions of higher education that are already accredited;
- Continuous quality assurance at accredited institutions and their programmes (including re-accreditation).

In carrying out these activities KAA aims, among others, at opening up the sector of Higher Education to new providers from Kosovo and abroad; to promote, improve and develop the quality and quality assurance of the HE sector; and to create transparency and comparability in the interest of providers, students and the labour market. KAA aims to encourage innovative forms and content in higher education and to ensure the comparability of degrees from Kosovo HEIs with those awarded by international programmes.

The research project

The present analysis was conducted under the project “Development of quality assurance in Kosovo higher education - systemic and institutional approaches”, with the support of the Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, through the “Enhancing Youth Employment” project. The project is aiming at identifying the characteristics of a national quality assurance system that contributes to the enhancement of education quality, while responding to the needs of the higher education institutions. The main role of the research project is to reflect to what extent
the national quality assurance system is fit for purpose and responds to the needs of the higher education sector in Kosovo at both systemic and institutional levels. The final outcome of this research project is to support KAA in revising its standards and procedures, based on a solid amount of data and legitimate contributions from the members of the national academic community, higher education experts, civil society and international good practices.

Thirdly, the project had the following specific objectives:
- Identify the characteristics of a national quality assurance system that contributes to the enhancement of education quality, while responding to the needs of the higher education institutions;
- Determine if the national external quality assurance system is fit for purpose and responds to the needs of the higher education sector in Kosovo;
- Collect and analyse the perception of higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders regarding the external quality assurance processes and internal quality assurance practices;
- Identify examples of good practice from international study cases across the European Higher Education Area in terms of quality assurance systems, mechanisms and instruments;
- Align the Kosovo quality assurance model to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (revised and adopted in 2015);
- Revise the KAA standards and procedures based on the collected data.

In terms of methodology, the project implied a desk research and data collection involving the members of the national academic community, higher education experts, civil society and international good practices. The data provided a crucial insight regarding the perception of higher education institutions and national stakeholders towards the quality assurance processes. In particular, the members of the academic community in Kosovo were consulted through an online survey conducted between 10th – 23rd of November 2016, while the national stakeholders involving the MEST, higher education experts and student representatives were consulted during the quality assurance conference taking place on 1st of December in Kosovo.

The statute of the survey respondents was usually the following from each higher education institution: Rector, Vice-rector with responsibilities in quality assurance, President/director of the quality assurance committee/commission, Director/head of the quality assurance office/department/unit and Student representative. Besides the position of the respondents, in order to ensure the representativeness of the data, the following criteria were taken into account: type of institution (university, college, institute, higher professional school), property form (public, private), as well as the size of the institution (differentiated in 4 categories).

Taking stock

As mentioned above, the aim of the research was to identify the characteristics of a national quality assurance system that contributes to the enhancement of education quality, while
responding to the needs of the higher education institutions. This was achieved by collecting and analysing the perception of the higher education institutions on:

- the role of the national system for quality assurance and the relation between its enhancement and compliance roles;
- current and future role of the national system for quality assurance;
- satisfaction and fitness for purpose of the national system for quality assurance;
- internal quality assurance processes and on external quality assurance system – methodological level and system wide;
- definitions of quality related concepts;
- the impact of external regulations/provisions on the functioning of internal processes;

The following analysis reflects the perceptions of the members of the academic community on the current state of quality assurance provisions. In order to reflect the different levels of the categories above, the data was structured in line with the topics underlined as research objectives.

Conceptualization

The first objective of the research was to identify the understandings and individual perception given by the higher education institutions to two of the main concepts in quality assurance: “quality culture” and “quality education”. Even though there are as many understandings over these terms as there are stakeholders and contexts and that quality is a philosophical concept that lacks a general theory in the literature (Green, 1994; Westerheijden, 1999), most the respondents generally agreed with the definitions provided by the survey. The following data shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency. When asked to provide their views over the term “quality culture”, 69.4% of the respondents considered that the concept is defined by the “common responsibility and accountability of the entire academic community on institutional quality”. Secondly, 59.5% of the respondents considered that quality culture is defined by "a both top-down and bottom-up approach, where the institutional management is leading and coordinating rather than manage the processes related to institutional quality".

Secondly, when asked about what is being reflected by the expression “quality education” culture, the responses were not equally consensual: 73.2% of the respondents considered it was the “graduates educated as responsible citizens engaged in democratic societies”, while 72.5% of the respondents considered quality education reflected by the study programs being recognised in different rankings. An equal percentage of 70% respondents were equally divided saying that that quality education is defined by student-centred learning and performance in research, which were provided as two separate options. Lastly, 63.3% of the respondents considered quality education defined by the graduates having transferable skills that support them in migrating from one field to another.

Legislative framework, fitness for purpose and satisfaction level
Another objective of the research was to identify the perception of the higher education institutions about the current role of the national quality assurance system, to evaluate the satisfaction level and need for improvement, as well as the fitness for purpose of the external quality assurance system.

The following data shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency.

When asked about their personal opinion on the current role of the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo, 71.7% of the respondents considered that the role is to support the higher education institutions in the continuous development of their operations. The second most preferred answer was agreed by 70.2% of the respondents considering that the role of the national system for quality assurance is to certify that the minimum quality standards are met (threshold standards). A lower agreement from the respondents (66.4%) considered that the role is to ensure public accountability of higher education institutions. Surprisingly, only 36.6% of the respondents agreed that the role of the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo is to safeguard the state budget/government funds.

The respondents were also asked about the fitness for purpose of the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo and the responses are presented in the following figure.

4. You would say about the national system of quality assurance in Kosovo that...

(131 de răspunsuri)

Respondents were also surveyed about their satisfaction level in relation to the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo, as presented below.
Given that the survey included an open ended question so that respondents would bring arguments to justify their satisfaction level, some of the respondents provided further details about their impression, arguments that can be grouped in the following categories:

1. **General lack of minimum standards to ensure a consistent threshold across the higher education sector, while the application of the existing standards is not strict enough:**
   "Monitoring and controlling must be more strict."
   "The information on quality assurance is not comprehensive as the guides and handbooks do not have easily identifiable indicators or are not applied consistently."
   "There is still more room when it comes to clearly defining all the processes and making sure that there is enough supporting documentation."
   "Provide the minimum quality standards and also help the institutions to increase the quality system."

2. **Subjectivity and lack of consistency in the application of the standards and procedures:**
   "The Quality Assurance Agency may change evaluation criteria during the process (after institutions apply for accreditation)"
   "KAA has used double standards with regards to accreditation of public universities versus accreditation of private higher education institutions. Whereas public universities from the outset are accredited as universities irrespective of the fact that they do not meet the legal requirements to be accredited as universities, they are accredited as universities from the beginning."
   "The national system uses double standards for public and private institutions. For example the public institutions do not satisfy the minimum criteria to be"
called universities, nevertheless they are accredited as such on the basis of parliament decision.”

"The national QA system in Kosovo should not by any means discriminate on private institutions. It should foster competition in terms of academic values, and it should also support private institutions by providing additional support for increasing quality in teaching and learning.”

"The agency applies double standards when accrediting Institutions and Programs. Based on their own Report on May 2016, only 5 Institutions meet the threshold for having 3 PhD per program. Even though major Institutions do not fulfil this criteria, the agency continued to accredit new programs without meeting the minimum criteria requested by the law.”

3. Bureaucratic processes that do not have enough focus on the achievement of learning outcomes and employability of graduates:

"The agency should pay attention not only on documents and paper but also on the students performance and results."

"I don’t see expected results achieved.”

"I think that quality assurance has not reached a satisfactory level. This can be proven that graduated students encounter difficulties to find in professional practice.”

"Not a public university or a private one will ever maintain or improve quality until they get to face with their responsibilities of understanding that students' outcome it is very important to deal with. So, in order to maintain or achieve a quality of higher education we must put students first, respect and deal with their needs, adjust the level of communication and being open that students freely express their concern in a particular field.”

"Sometimes I have the feeling that the entire process is more focused on the papers, not in real fact checking.”

"There are criteria which, in case are met objectively, learning outcomes should be better.”

4. Insufficient information and lack of transparency in the higher education sector itself:

"The national QA system should also be more open and transparent for the public and for researchers in terms on student number on private and public institutions, number of academic staff, number of programs, pass rates, statistics about employment etc.”

"I feel neutral since there are not enough statistics on quality assurance in Kosovo.”

5. General functioning of internal quality assurance processes across the higher education institutions:
"The lack of an internal (from students) system of evaluating the teachers."
"Each institution should have a policy and office for quality assurance."
"The only quality assurance occurring in Kosovo is when it is time for the programme accreditation. The system should ensure that quality assurance is integrated within each institution and that is its standards are met and implemented daily."

6. Shortcomings in the functioning and professionalism of KAA itself:
"The staff at the KAA is not professional and at times unfriendly. KAA does not use appropriate communication and documentation tools."
"KAA does not apply standard appeals procedures."
"The international evaluation teams do not understand the Kosovo context and sometimes they are not well prepared. A mix of international and local experts could improve the processing of information, verification of evidence and would eliminate KAA interference."
"Rigid and "copy-paste" laws are not always fit for purpose of a thriving education system. Duplication of procedures between agencies also creates undo burden on resource constrained institutions."
"Reporting and possibility for complaints and appeals, as well as independent (autonomous) work of KAA” would be welcomed.

The survey also addressed the question of the necessity for improvement of the current national quality assurance system and the respondents rated it as as follows:

5. Do you think that the national system of quality assurance in Kosovo needs to be improved?

As a subsequent question, survey participants were further asked why do they believe that the national system of quality assurance in Kosovo needs to be improved, by rating the options given in the questionnaire. The following data shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency.
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According to 65.6% of the respondents, the most important reason why the national system of quality assurance in Kosovo needs to be improved is that it should rather prioritise quality enhancement within the higher education institutions. Secondly, for 49.6% of the participants to the survey, the driver for improvement should be that the current standards are not detailed and specific enough in order to differentiate education providers. With a similar weight, 45.8% of the participants considered that the current system needs to be changed because it is making too many positive decisions for accreditation. Finally, 34.3% of the respondents consider that the national system of quality assurance in Kosovo needs to be improved because it not properly take into account internal quality management systems.

**Internal quality assurance**

Going into more detail on the internal level of quality assurance, the study also aimed to identify the perception of the higher education institutions regarding the incentives for the development of internal quality management systems, the development of quality culture at institutional level and, lastly, about the self-evaluation process. It is important to mention that, when approaching these questions, the respondents referred to their own definition and vision of ‘quality culture’, a conceptualisation which can be observed earlier in this report.

13. To what extent is the quality culture developed across your institution?

![Chart showing responses to the question](chart.png)

Secondly, the survey analysed the impressions of the respondents regarding the necessary incentives for the development of internal quality management systems. The data shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency. The highest percentage of responses was reached by the survey options referring to any form of funding as a good incentive for the development of internal quality management systems: financial motivations from the state for the enhancement of different segments of activity (83.9%) as well as financial motivations from the state if higher quality levels are reached (78.3%). Similarly, more institutional autonomy was considered by 67.1% of the respondents as a good incentive for the development of internal quality management systems. Lastly, imposing stricter penalties in case of failure to comply with quality standards was also quite
preferred, by 64,2% of the respondents, as a driver for development of internal quality management systems.

As a part of the institutional quality management, the survey also addressed the respondents perceptions over the self-evaluation process. The data shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency. 92,5% of the participants to the survey considered that the self-evaluation process represents a valuable part of a functional internal quality management system and 76,8 of the respondents consider the self-evaluation supports the higher education institution in reflecting truly and profoundly on the quality state of its own processes. 61,5% of the participants to the survey also agreed that it is a process based on the consultation of the academic community. However, sadly enough, 51,7% of the respondents consider that the self-evaluation process is a formal process which has the sole purpose of producing a self-evaluation report required by the quality assurance agency.

Current quality assurance approach and its impact on the higher education sector in Kosovo
Another objective of the research project was to identify the perception of the higher education institutions on the quality assurance provisions at methodological level, while the systemic level has been already approach under the section dedicated to Legislative framework, fitness for purpose and satisfaction level.

Firstly, given the fact that every change in the national quality assurance approach has to be evidence based and, more importantly, timely, the participants to the survey have been asked about the elements that they consider reflect the maturity/development level of a quality assurance system. The data shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency.

For most of the respondents, 75,6%, the strongest indicator of a mature and functional quality assurance system is when the structures for quality assurance at institutional level have a constant activity, regardless of the external visits. Also, another important indicator, as seen by the 63,4% of the participants to the survey is when minimum quality indicators (at least) are met across the entire higher education sector. Equally important, 59,8% of the respondents considers that when external review reports only confirm what has already been acknowledged in the self evaluation documents, is an indicator for a mature and developed quality assurance system. Last, but not least, 53,7% of the respondents consider that a QA system is developed when the majority of accreditation decisions are positive.

Secondly, given the fact that quality assurance systems do not only increase the trust in the QA structures operations, but also the trust in the education itself, the participants to the survey were consulted on the credibility of the higher education degrees in Kosovo and the impressions are reflected in the figure below.
When selecting the negative option, respondents were asked why do they believe that the higher education and academic degrees in Kosovo completely lack credibility in the international world, and the impressions are expressed in the figure below.

8. Why do you believe that the higher education and academic degrees in Kosovo lack credibility in the international world?

(37 de răspunsuri)

Taking into account that there is a general feeling across the higher education sector in Kosovo that the national system for quality assurance does not manage to differentiate between different types of higher education institutions, respondents were also consulted in this regard, as reflected below.
Moreover, when selecting the affirmative option, respondents were asked based on what criteria should the external quality assurance processes be differentiated between higher education institutions. The biggest part of the respondents (61.2%) considered that the quality assurance processes should be differentiated based on the decisions in previous quality assurance evaluations. The second most preferred option (50.7%) considered international rankings as a distinguishable element. The number of students, age of the higher education institution, and property form (public/private) were the least preferred elements to be used in differentiating quality assurance processes.

When looking at the current external quality assurance provisions, the respondents were approached firstly on the current status of several processes, as well as on suggestions for improvement for what it is planned as the next framework.

The participants to the survey have expressed their views over the self-evaluation process and external visit, as reflected in the figure below.

Surprisingly enough, 10 respondents (7.6%) consider that both processes are purely formal, bureaucratic and bring no real support for the institution, our openness matters very little. Also,
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2 participants to the survey agreed that they select what to show the Expert Teams and that they should not we acknowledge their own mistakes. The respondents were asked to describe the recommendations offered by the Expert Teams in the external quality assurance processes organised by the national agency. The data below shows the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency. Generally, respondents believe that the recommendations offered by the Expert Teams are adapted to the context and relevant for the institution (77,3%). However, quite a big percentage of the participants to the survey (28,6%) believe the recommendations are subjective, depending on the institutions where the experts come from. Also sadly enough, 18,3% of the respondents believe that the recommendations demonstrate that the experts do not really understand the functioning of the institution, and 15,2% of the participants to the survey consider that they mostly see the recommendations as formal (they matter in the next external evaluation).

Looking forward
As mentioned before, the higher education sector in Kosovo is considering a general revision of the national provisions and procedures in order to ensure that the quality assurance approach continues to respond to the global, national and institutional needs. Having this in mind, the research project also aimed at reflecting the perceptions of the higher education institutions in relation to the future developments of the methodology. The present section reflects on one hand the opinions of the respondents when asked about the desirable role of both the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo, as well as of the national quality assurance agency and, on the other hand, provides future-oriented views that the participants to the survey provided when asked about suggestions for improvement of the current KAA standards and Guidelines.

When asked about their personal opinion on the desirable role of the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo, 87% of the respondents considered that the role of the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo should be to support the higher education institutions in the continuous development of their operations. The second most preferred desirable role was to evaluate the quality of the processes in order to enhance the student learning experience, preferred by 81,6% of the respondents. Thirdly, 80,1% of the survey participants considered as desirable role to evaluate and consolidate the quality management system at institutional level. Last, but not least, 77% of the respondents agreed that certifying that the minimum quality standards are met (Threshold Standards) should be the desirable role of the national system for quality assurance in Kosovo. The data above reflects the distribution of the responses denoted by 4 and 5 (1 meaning completely disagree with the statements provided by the survey, and 5 meaning totally agree), in relative frequency.

Secondly, the respondents were surveyed on what they should be the role of the national quality assurance agency in Kosovo and the responses are reflected in the figure below.
More importantly, the participants to the survey have expressed, in an open ended question, their views over what could be done in order to improve the current standards and guidelines for quality assurance included in KAA procedures. The survey suggestions can be grouped in the following categories:

1. **Improve the clarity and measurability of the standards and ensure their strict and non-discriminatory application:**
   
   "The current guidelines allow for voluminous textual presentation and little measurable evidence."
   "Use of qualitative measures such as external assessment moderation."
   "Strict standards on number of students in accordance to the number of lecturers and space available."
   "To be strict in implementing quality standards among all higher education institutions..."
   "Under accreditation of higher education institutions, KAA must maintain strict standards once they are in the system."
   "It would be great if the standards were the same for private institutions as for the public universities."
   "Strict check of regular staff for their competence and availability during academic year."
   "The guidelines to be more simplified, precise, understandable and clear for the HEIs. There should not be repeated and overlapped criteria."
   "More quantifiable/measurable quality assurance standards and indicators, with less option for subjective interpretation; more transparency about the criteria for institutional and program accreditation across different higher education institutions (public and non-public)."
   "Regulate student/academic staff ratio."
"The standards must be concrete, easily applicable for higher education institutions, comply with legislation and compatible with the requirements of the labour market and be transparent to all relevant stakeholders and institutions."

"External evaluation and criteria based on number of the students."

2. **Extend the remit of the standards**

"Institutional organisation, performance, autonomy, and accountability are not verified and weighted."

"KAA standards and guidelines should recognise the interdisciplinary study programs."

"Include standards for internal quality assurance."

"Assessment and evaluation of teaching quality."

"Include transparency and accountability."

"Criteria for outcomes."

"Assessment and evaluation of teaching quality."

"Set similar standards and restrictions to the public university as well. Require accountability on academic integrity. Request that all private and public colleges/universities use plagiarism software detection."

3. **More transparent and continuous external quality assurance processes:**

"More visits to the institutions and meetings with collages to measure the real implementation."

"More systematic quality control and oversight over the academic units; guidance on how to achieve the state of art."

"More visits"

"Continuous and rigorous monitoring of institutions activities."

"Transparency and objective opinions."

"To be monitored in continuous way, during the semester."

"More visits in HEIs."

"More transparency."

4. **Suggestions to KAA, as coordinator of the external quality assurance processes:**

"KAA to increase the level of constructiveness in accredited programs."

"Increase the HR capacity, respectively additional staff who would be able to supervise the activities of Higher Education Institutions"

"Give more recommendations and solutions for increasing the quality of educational institutions based on international practices."

"External experts must be more independent in their recommendations."

"Visits academic staff during lectures."

"Recognition that different university missions and mandates require some flexibility in interpretation and implementation of the standards. Remove strictly
penalty-based evaluations and provide institutions with grace periods in order to achieve necessary reforms.”
“It should not provide only yes/no recommendations, but also the level of accomplishment.”
“I would involve labour market in the process in order to remind importance of their needs to this process.”
“More participation of students.”
“KAA should have a clearer view over the accreditation criteria when approaching the HEIs, in order not to create any confusion.”
“To give more autonomy to the institutions in program development.”
“I would recommend to simplify the procedures for double and Joint Degrees and the international validation programs. Also, I would kindly propose to have a shorter period for the overall process of accreditation.”
“KAA should work closer with the HEIs.”
“KAA should be more active in the aspect of recommendation for HEI”

5. **Recommendations for the entire higher education sector:**

“A further development of the NQF framework is required, especially on the basis of recognizing prior learning and prior experience in the framework, but also creating a clear bridge between academic and professional degrees.”
“A fair and transparent ranking of private and public institutions in Kosovo should be undertaken in a fair and transparent manner.”
“I would give the universities back to students and not pressure them to fit to the educational system. This could be done by conducting thorough studies to evaluate the needs of the population, the aptitudes and interests of students, their preferred learning styles, their interests etc. and make changes accordingly.”
“Market needs and developments, program outcomes, future graduates competencies in respect to market needs should be considered when making a decision to accredit a program.”
“Research should be made part of national development strategy.”
“There should be a system for ranking HEIs/study programmes in the country.”
“Facilitating forums for sharing of best practices in quality management systems and practices, linking also to external agencies.”
“MEST and KAA should make a national market analyses about the needs of the country regarding higher education. Thus, according to the results/needs both MEST and KAA should suggest higher education providers to offer programs that are needed in Kosovo in order to improve the quality of services and to increase the employment of graduates.”
“Good research projects that contribute to the development of comparative advantage for Kosovo should be financed by the Government of Kosovo such as research projects in energy, energy efficiency, IT, medicine, agriculture, food technologies, mining, mine extraction.”
National experts and stakeholders

In addition to the survey presented above, the second data collection instrument was represented by a Workshop for quality officers at the higher education institutions and a National conference for the development of quality assurance in Kosovo higher education, taking place between 30th of November and 1st of December 2016 in Pristina. The two events brought together the representatives of several institutions, authorities and organizations as well as national and international experts, such as: Dr. Arsim Bajrami - Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Mag. Gernot Pfandler - Ambassador of Austria in Kosovo, Mr. Colin Tuck - Director of EQAR, Dr. Blerim Rexha - President of SQC, Mr. Driton Dalipi - Project Manager of the EYE project, Dr. Hebert Amato - Member of the SQC, Dr. Guy Haug - Member of the SQC, Ms. Drita Kadriu - Director of HE in MEST, Dr. Teuta Danuza - Expert in Qualification Frameworks and others.

Besides their general perspective over higher education, quality assurance and the present project, the speakers approached the following questions: Are the needs of the HEIs the same as they were in 2008, when quality assurance and compliance with external standards were first established in Kosovo? Is the national QA system still fit for purpose? How do the revised ESGs influence the national system of QA? How does the higher education in Kosovo look like 8 years after the establishment of KAA? Where is the quality of education standing? What has Kosovo achieved and where does QA fit into this? Should the national policy making change its direction in relation to QA? What is the new approach we should invest our efforts and resources into?

The MEST recognizes that KAA has become one of the most important institutions of the Republic of Kosovo in building quality standards, therefore states that the agency is fully supported by the Government in its work and is fully independent in setting high quality and internationally comparable standards so that Kosovo could be included in the European Higher Education Area as soon as possible and be in line with all the principles of the Bologna process. Furthermore, MEST representatives have underlined that an additional responsibility of KAA in implementing quality standards derives from its EQAR registered agency status, so that to be competitive and comparable with other agencies that are part of the European networks for quality assurance. When looking towards the future, the ministry, as a major stakeholder in the education sector, considers that KAA should focus on contributing to strong and credible universities, profiling them and developing the private sector of higher education.

Most of the speakers, as well as the audience inputs have very much focused on the importance of constantly engaging the entire academic community in the development of higher education, especially referring to stakeholders that have lacked involvement in the past, such as students and society at large, but also to improve the communication between KAA and the HEIs and generally demonstrate more trust in social partners across the higher education sector. Even more specifically, it was underlined that KAA should better explain its decisions to HEIs, decisions that should be always supported by evidence. Moreover, students’ representatives have brought further attention on the need for students to be considered and recognized as constructive partners of KAA.
When referring to the current landscape of higher education in Kosovo, the national stakeholders have underlined the great need for diversity of HEIs, of processes and study programs, but also the importance of flexibility of the quality standards in relation to the size of the education providers. Furthermore, the institutional capacity of HEIs has to stay at the core of KAA priorities by improving the internal quality assurance systems, by insisting on getting more critical and analytical self-assessment reports, as well as by strengthening the monitoring mechanisms.

When referring to the relation between quality assurance and other segments of great impact on higher education, the speakers and participants at the two events have expressed the need for KAA’s work to be aligned with the Strategy for Kosovo Economic development, while the study programs should be more connected to labor market needs analysis, while the career development should be the main aim of national stakeholders by having in mind that the learning outcomes are linked with NQF and Dublin descriptors.

Conclusions
Kosovo’s external quality assurance system surely is at a crossroads. While some countries are now shifting from program accreditation to institutional evaluation (Flanders, Slovenia), others are imposing barriers to innovative practices (India, Peru), establishing more rigorous QA standards (Chile, Netherlands, Turkey) or moving towards deregulation (Australia) (Salmi, 2015), the current research report is giving quite a clear view of what the future of quality assurance in higher education in Kosovo should be. Given its current state of quality, the composition of the higher education sector, as well as the inputs collected through the present survey, it already seems quite consensual that the next methodology and processes will be standard led, proposing clear and measurable criteria in order to evaluate the institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management at the level of every study program and HEI in Kosovo.

A very important and valuable input of the present research is that there is a visible push for crucial concepts for development in higher education, such as transparency, independence and accountability. Being aware of these needs already represents a great step ahead in terms of higher education policy and policy making.

If we look at the global indicative trends, we can observe a tendency of hardening the quality assurance in the direction of regulation, a move away from a regime which at least included the notion of quality improvement based on collegial engagement and recommendations to a regime requiring judgements of compliance against set standards (ibid.).

In 2014, the European Commission published a study on progress in the development of quality assurance systems in the various member states and on cooperation activities at European level (European Union, 2014) where authors observe that there is a trend for higher education systems to start with a quality assurance system focusing on supervision and ensuring minimum standards, which then evolves towards a more improvement-oriented approach. The study also comments that there are developments towards more institutional, „light touch” and enhancement-oriented quality assurance systems, primarily in more „mature” systems acting in compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2005), observing that the transition from a programme-oriented to an institution-oriented approach is often gradual,
through the step-wise introduction of institutional elements. However, given that fact that the Kosovo system never implied focusing on supervision and ensuring minimum standards, that would be now a good start for a mature consolidation of the national quality assurance system.

References: