

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS ON THE
DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS IN
HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KOSOVO: PROSPECTS AND
CHALLENGES**

By

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned **Fjolla Kaçaniku** hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language.

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Abstract

The Bologna Process has brought widespread developments in higher education throughout the European continent and beyond. Among its action lines, quality assurance is considered of significant importance. Kosovo started implementing the Bologna Process in 2001 although it was never formally admitted as a member. This thesis explores how the Bologna Process influenced the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo in the period of 2001 – 2016 and what the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms is on quality assurance. The results identify the influence of the Bologna Process in the development of the three quality assurance components, that are, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), the external quality assurance, and the internal quality assurance in Kosovo's higher education system. The thesis concludes that the Bologna Process had a positive influence in the development of quality assurance components and mechanisms in Kosovo.

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List of Abbreviations

BFUG – Bologna Follow-Up Group Secretariat

CEENQA – Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

EURASHE – European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

ENQA – European Network for Quality Assurance

EQAR – European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

ESG – European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance

EU – European Union

EUA – European University Association

HEI – Higher Education Institutions

INQAAHE – International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

KAA – Kosovo Accreditation Agency

KBPT – Kosovo Bologna Promoters Team

MEST – Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology

NQF – National Qualifications Framework

NQC – National Quality Council

PISG – Provisional Institutions of Self-Government

RIT – Rochester Institute of Technology in Kosovo

TEMPUS – Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies Program

UNMIK – United Nations Mission in Kosovo

Introduction

There have been major developments worldwide in higher education in the past decade (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). Research shows, for example, how the demand for higher education has increased drastically (OECD, 2009). In turn, this increased demand required governments and higher education institutions (hereafter as HEIs) to make reforms in order to cope with the shift to mass higher education (OECD, 2009). Even though these movements are not entirely new, recently the speed of development and the magnitude of reforms have increased (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). Europe has witnessed unprecedented developments, in particular the Bologna Process. The Process, launched through the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 aimed at creating a European higher education system that is harmonized, of high quality standards, competitive, and engaging for students, scholars, researchers, and other entities involved in higher education (Marginson, S., & Rhoades, 2002). There are countries that have adopted the Bologna Process even without being a signatory of the Bologna Declaration. Kosovo started the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2001 (Rexhaj & Pupovci, 2015) although it was never formally admitted as a member. Furthermore, Kosovo has kept improving its higher education system by implementing Bologna-inspired reform (MEST, 2015).

Some scholars consider that “the Bologna Process has arguably become the most significant and transformative higher education reform process in history” (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). Among its action lines, quality assurance is considered of particular importance. “Quality assurance is the systematic review of educational programs and institutions to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained” (UNESCO, 2017). Quality assurance in higher education is defined by two components, namely quality enhancement and accountability (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Sadlak, 2000; Scott, 2005; Schwartz & Westerheijden, 2004).

While accountability is more related to HEIs satisfying a set of quality assurance criteria, enhancement captures a broader set of elements such as teaching and learning, research, and innovation, among others.

From 1999 onwards, the Bologna Process has brought widespread development in the national quality assurance systems of Europe. Strengthening quality assurance in higher education has been addressed closely, both as enhancement and accountability, during several meetings of the Bologna countries ministers in charge of higher education (e.g. Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, and London 2007).

One of the main results of the Bologna Process with respect to quality assurance was the emergence of common Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). As the concept of quality assurance in higher education is not easy to describe, these guidelines aim at providing information regarding the quality assurance across various stakeholders Europe. The ESG do not only entail the formalization of rules and procedures, but are considered as a roadmap on how stakeholders involved in the higher education can contribute towards quality assurance and enhancement.

Although there is much literature on the Bologna Process and its influence on quality assurance, there is no research unfolding the influence of the Bologna Process on the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education system in Kosovo. The main purpose of this thesis is thus to evaluate whether Kosovo's government met its objective in the area (action line) of quality assurance. These objectives had been set in accordance with Bologna principles, although Kosovo has never been a formal member of the Process.

This topic is highly relevant for Kosovo, for the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST), Kosovo Accreditation Agency, HEIs, academic and administrative staff, students, and other higher education stakeholders.

It is widely believed that the voluntary implementation of Bologna reforms had a significant impact on quality assurance components, tools, and mechanisms (Attard, 2009). Therefore, it is important to identify and review the most important developments thus far in this area. The topic is interesting and relevant not only for the Kosovar community, but for a broader audience of scholars and policy makers from the EHEA who want to know why Kosovo is implementing the Bologna Process without being a signatory to the Bologna Declaration, what reforms have taken place already, and what their impact is.

This thesis is a contribution to advancing the knowledge regarding the Bologna reform in Kosovo. At the same time, as the study specifically focuses on the quality assurance, it highlights its policy relevance in the context of the Bologna reforms beyond the specific case of Kosovo. Finally, the President of the State Council of Quality in Kosovo agreed to support this study and its findings will afterwards be presented to the Council and KAA and will possibly be utilized for their internal purposes.

Considering the limited documents available in Kosovo on this topic, the study opted for a mixed method design in order to examine the influence of the Bologna Process on the development of quality assurance mechanisms in the higher education system in Kosovo. It combines content analysis of policy documents, laws, administrative regulations, statutes, and strategies, with semi-structured interviews conducted with higher education experts and civil society representatives in Kosovo. There are two main question that this study aims to address:

Question 1: *How did the Bologna Process influence the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo in the period of 2001 - 2016?*

Considering that Kosovo started to implement the Bologna Process in 2001, this question reveals the Bologna Process influence in the development of quality assurance mechanism from its start to date.

Question 2: *What is the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms on quality assurance in Kosovo?*

There are many stakeholders in the process of quality assurance. This study reveals the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms in quality assurance through identifying the most relevant stakeholders and describing the role they play.

The thesis hypothesized that the Bologna Process had a positive influence in the development of quality assurance components, tools, and mechanisms in Kosovo. In order to test the hypothesis, the structure of the thesis is as follows: the first chapter starts by providing an overview of quality assurance in higher education, describing the emergence of the quality assurance mechanism in Europe, and highlighting the influence of the Bologna Process in this area. The second chapter summarizes how and why Kosovo is implementing the Bologna Process without being signatory to the Bologna Declaration, and how the reform influenced quality assurance developments in Kosovo. The third chapter explains the methodology used to address the research questions. The results and discussions in the fourth chapter identify the influence of the Bologna Process in the development of the three quality assurance components, that are, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), the external quality assurance, and the internal quality assurance in Kosovo's higher education system. The final section of the thesis concludes that the Bologna Process had a positive influence in the development of quality assurance components in Kosovo.

1. Overview of Quality Assurance in Europe

This chapter first discusses the purpose of quality assurance and provides an overview of the emergence of the quality assurance components and mechanisms in higher education in Europe. The chapter also describe the Bologna Process and how it influenced this development. Lastly, it reveals that the Process influenced the emergence of mutual Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

1.1 Purpose of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Scholars define quality assurance in higher education through many perspectives (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Schwartz & Westerheijden, 2004). One approach they share entails the question of ‘what is the purpose of quality assurance in higher education?’ Scholars such as Brennan & Shah, 2000; Schwartz & Westerheijden, 2004; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014 identify multiple purposes that quality assurance in higher education serves. This includes: to safeguard the use of public financial resources; to enhance quality assurance, monitoring, and control in higher education; to inform the public; to influence competitiveness across HEIs; to stimulate the internationalization of HEIs; and to certify compliance with quality assurance criteria, among others. However, “the classic dichotomy in the purposes of quality assurance is between quality enhancement and accountability” (Beerrens, 2015). Although some scholars argue that HEIs manage to better satisfy one or the other of the purposes (Thune, 1996; Stensaker, 2011; Stensaker, 2014), they nevertheless suggest that there should be a balance in maintaining both quality enhancement and accountability as equally important components (Thune, 1996; Stensaker, 2011; Stensaker, 2014; Beerrens, 2015).

1.2 Emergence of Quality Assurance

From a global perspective, quality assurance was traditionally considered to be primarily an intrinsic component of teaching and research (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014). Measuring quality was under the full discretion of the HEIs and academics. It was an internal responsibility of the University to monitor and control its own quality assurance. However, during 1980s and 1990s, the demand for higher education has increased drastically (OECD, 2009). In turn, this increased demand required governments and HEIs to make reforms in order to cope with the shift to mass higher education (OECD, 2009). As higher education moved from the elitist to the massification phase (i.e. 1980s and 1990s), the client-oriented provision of higher education transpired as a result (Powell & Solga, 2011; Pinheiro & Antonowicz, 2014). Since HEIs had to compete among each other, they were stimulated to open towards external evaluation structures to prove their worth to external audiences. In addition, with the emergence of higher education internationalization at the beginning of the 2000s, quality assurance grew into a definite component of higher education through both internal and external quality assurance (Scott, 2005; Knight, 2005; Sadlak, 2006; Asderaki, 2009).

1.3 Stakeholders of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The evaluation of quality assurance in higher education led to the introduction of external evaluators and accreditation agencies as new stakeholders of quality assurance in higher education (Powell & Solga, 2011). Although HEI wanted to preserve their autonomy, the involvement of external evaluation was perceived as compulsory. In other words, both the government and HEI were distinguished as the two-responsible entities to handle the quality assurance element. HEIs were thus obliged to cooperate with new actors responsible for quality assurance (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014).

Consequently, in addition to HEIs, the main stakeholders in charge for the quality assurance of higher education included the government, quality assurance/accreditation bodies, academic and administrative staff, and students. All things considered, quality assurance and the development of quality assurance components became an important subject within many countries' higher education policies, and the EU member states are no exception.

1.4 Europe and Quality Assurance

From the 1990s onwards, appraising quality of higher education was identified among the core objectives of the European Union (Asderaki, 2009). It started with “the European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education (1994–1995)” (European Commission, 1995, Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education, Denmark and Comité National d’Evaluation, France, 1998). Subsequently, on the 24th of September 1998, the Council of Europe recommended (98/561/EC) that member-states develop quality assurance mechanisms that evaluate HEIs according to a four-stage model. This recommendation incited member states to 1) establish quality assurance agency(s) that were to become independent from the government; 2) develop internal and external quality assurance guidelines; 3) enhance the participation of multiple stakeholders in higher education that considered the quality assurance from different angles; and 4) establish transparency by publishing the results/outcomes from the evaluation (ENQA, 2003). Consequently, the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in higher education was established in 2000, where the Bologna Process played a crucial role. The primary objective of ENQA’s establishment was to stimulate European co-operation through mutual quality assurance guidelines. ENQA welcomes various accreditation agencies from many nations around Europe.

1.5 Significance of the Bologna Process in European Higher Education

“The Bologna Process has arguably become the most significant and transformative higher education reform process in history” (Crosier & Parveva, 2013; Ala-Vähälä, 2016). The Bologna Declaration was signed by 29 countries in 1999 with the purpose to create a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The objectives of the Bologna Declaration were first operationalized in six action lines: 1) the introduction of a harmonized system of comparable degrees, 2) the adoption of the three-cycle system, 3) the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), 4) emphasis devoted to mobility 5) the enhancement of quality assurance in higher education, and 6) the promotion of the European dimension in higher education. The Bologna Process placed the “quality assurance of higher education at the heart of the setting up of the EHEA” (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). To become a member of the Bologna Process, countries must be a signatory to the Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe. The Bologna Process remains until today a voluntary intergovernmental process that operates according to the open method of coordination.

1.6 Influence of the Bologna Process on the Development of Quality Assurance Components

From 1999 onwards, the Bologna Process has brought widespread development in the national quality assurance systems of European higher education. More specifically, the action line of strengthening the quality assurance in higher education has been addressed more closely in a number of ministerial meetings (e.g. Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, and London 2007). In Prague, on 19 May 2001, the ministers of the member-states pledged to support the development of quality assurance components at the institutional, national, and European level (Prague Communiqué, 2001). After the meeting in Prague various quality assurance bodies were established: Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in

Higher Education 2002, European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education 2003, Joint Quality Initiative 2001, Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie 2002, and the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education 2003.

The focus on creating mutual quality assurance mechanisms was in the foreground at the Berlin meeting in 2003, where cooperation among the countries was proposed, as was the establishment of mutual trust with respect to their national quality assurance systems. This proposal was extended to how the main actors in quality assurance - such as HEIs, national quality assurance agencies, and ENQA should collaborate in creating a set of guidelines and standards that reflect on the quality of higher education provisions. The Berlin meeting concluded that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should comprise the following: a) descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the accreditation/quality assurance bodies and the institutions involved, b) the evaluation of programs or institutions through the internal assessment and the external assessments; c) fostering student's role regarding the quality assurance aspects of HEIs; d) establishing of a system of accreditation with equivalent measures, and d) enhancing international participation, cooperation, and networking (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). Following these objectives, at the 2005 ministerial meeting in Bergen, the participating countries adopted the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as proposed by European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and its partners constituting the E4 group: European University Association (EUA), European Students Union (ESU), EUA (European University Association), and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) (Bergen Communiqué, 2005). Lastly, in 2007 at the London ministerial conference the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was made official (London Communiqué, 2007).

EQAR was founded by the main organizations of higher education in Europe, the E4 Group. EQAR is the registry of the quality assurance agencies that currently operate in Europe and have demonstrated compliance with standards and guidelines of quality assurance.

1.7 Importance of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

One of the main results the Bologna Process Ministerial meetings was the emergence of common Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). As previously stated, there are internal and external quality assurance guidelines set by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Internal quality assurance guidelines are directed to HEIs, while external quality assurance to the national accreditation agency(s). As the concept of quality assurance in higher education is not easy to describe, the ESG aim at fostering a mutual understanding of quality assurance among various stakeholders in the European higher education. ESG recognize that various stakeholders, the government, HEIs, the academic and administrative staff, students, and other actors are involved with quality assurance actions. Quality assurance mechanisms set by ENQA also allow HEIs in the EHEA to have comparable quality assurance standards (Asderaki 2006).

The ESG are connected with many of the Bologna Process initiatives, such as student mobility, degree recognition, ECTS, employability, among others, that involve a quality assurance component. However, the ESG do not entail only the formalization of rules and procedures. Instead, they are considered as a roadmap on how stakeholders can contribute towards quality assurance and enhancement. Thus, to maintain quality assurance in higher education, cooperation among all the stakeholders that partake in the European higher education system is crucial (ESG, 2015).

To conclude, the literature suggest that the Bologna Process has played a crucial role in the development of quality assurance components, tools, and mechanism in the European higher education system. However, there is no research to suggest why Kosovo implements the Bologna Process without being formally admitted as a member, and how did that influence the development of quality assurance mechanism in higher education. The next chapter discusses the uniqueness of case of Kosovo.

2. The Bologna Process and Quality Assurance in Kosovo

This chapter provides an overview of the Bologna Process in Kosovo. It explains why Kosovo is implementing the Process without being a signatory country. In addition, it shows who are the main stakeholders and how the legal provisions for higher education in Kosovo correspond to the Bologna requirements. Lastly, it provides evidence on how the Bologna Process has influenced the development of quality assurance components in Kosovo.

2.1 Bologna Process in Kosovo

2.1.1 Overview of the Bologna Process in Kosovo

Kosovo started the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2001, despite never being formally admitted as a member. The first higher education institution that transformed its operations under the Bologna model was the public university, University of Prishtina, Hasan Prishtina, in the 2001-2002 academic year. Hasan Prishtina was proud to recognize the importance of the Bologna Process and it is one of the first HEIs in the Balkan region that reformed itself based on the Bologna model (Attard, 2009). Soon, other HEIs followed suit. As of 2009, all HEIs in Kosovo have transformed their operations according to the Bologna model, except for the Rochester Institute of Technology in Kosovo (RIT), which is accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and therefore operates according to the U.S. models (Rexhaj & Pupovci, 2015).

The countries that adopted the Bologna Process are members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Kosovo adopted the Bologna Process with the aim of thereupon becoming a formal member of the EHEA. This goal is predominantly driven by the perception that the Bologna Process is a positive reform of the higher education system that enhances the country's competitiveness. The Bologna Process operates according to the open method coordination, and there are only two eligibility criteria that countries ought to achieve (Rexhaj & Pupovci, 2015):

1. Countries ought to be part of the European Cultural Convention.
2. Countries ought to demonstrate willingness to comply with values, goals, and key policies of the EHEA.

However, regardless of Kosovo's enthusiasm for, and commitment to, becoming part of the EHEA, Kosovo has still not been admitted as a signatory country. Kosovo applied and was denied membership three times (Attard, 2009).

In 2005 and 2007, Kosovo was denied membership because of the following:

- "Kosovo is not a party to the European Cultural Convention."
- "By virtue of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, the international community has taken direct responsibility for Kosovo through UNMIK. It has exercised *de facto* governmental authority in Kosovo since the cessation of hostilities in 1999, with considerable competence in many areas, including education, now having been divested to the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government (PISG). Therefore, while Kosovo was theoretically a part of the Bologna Process –as a part of Serbia – *de facto* it was not" (BFUG, 2007).
- "As Bologna Follow-Up Group Secretariat (BFUG)¹ members were aware, UN-led negotiations have been conducted - under the leadership of Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland - for the future status process for Kosovo at the time (BFUG, 2007)".

¹ According to EHEA (2017), the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) "oversees the Bologna Process between the ministerial meeting. The BFUG meetings play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the ministerial Communiqués as well as in developing the Bologna Process."

However, it was recognized that the case of Kosovo was less straightforward than those of other countries that applied for membership (Attard, 2009). Reasons given by BFUG were as follows:

- “First, Kosovo – whatever its future political status - is clearly a part of geographical Europe, and its higher education system has undergone extensive reforms, with international participation, to implement the main Bologna reforms” (BFUG, 2007).
- “Second, there is a precedent for inviting Kosovo – under the current arrangements as United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)/Kosovo with a delegation co-chaired by UNMIK and the PISG – as an observer to Ministerial conferences within the frameworks of the Council of Europe and the European Union, in the latter case where such conferences are open to non-members, e.g. in the case of conferences including South East Europe” (BFUG, 2007).

It is important to note, however, that these arguments were not in favor of Kosovo becoming a member of the Bologna Process. Rather, the arguments were utilized to recognize the uniqueness of the case of Kosovo and the conceivable association with the Process. Kosovo was granted an opportunity to participate in the ministerial meetings as a ‘special observer’ to the Process and as a full member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, thereby achieving integration of Kosovo higher education in the EHEA (BFUG, 2007).

Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. However, in 2014, Kosovo was still denied membership on the grounds that it is not part of the European Cultural Convention, as one of the prerequisites of the Bologna membership and thus the EHEA (MEST, 2015).

2.1.2 Reasons for adopting the Bologna Process

Kosovo was part of the former Yugoslavia as an autonomous province of Serbia, from which it separated after a devastating war in 1999. As a result, Kosovo’s higher education system fell apart. The government after the war, with the assistance of international donor organizations, attempted to promote the development of the higher education system in Kosovo. Furthermore, the government of Kosovo was interested in transforming its underdeveloped economy. Adopting the Bologna Process was perceived as a rational choice at the time (Attard, 2009).

That is because the Bologna Process aims at changing countries' higher education systems and developing them into knowledge societies and economies (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). Consequently, the following are the explanations of the government to the question of why is Kosovo adopting the Bologna Process (MEST, 2015).

- Harmonization of the Law on Higher Education as countries of European Higher Education Area;
- Increasing the compatibility and comparability of Higher Education provisions with signatory countries and beyond;
- Promoting the employability by facilitating further development and improvement of National Qualifications Framework (NQF);
- Enhancing the international cooperation, mobility of students, and scientific staff with countries of European Higher Education Area (EHEA);
- Removing inequalities in access to higher education by providing equal opportunities in in Higher Education involving all groups regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, religion, special educational needs;
- Enhancing the capacity building for research, innovation, and technology transfer, and increased cooperation with EHEA countries;
- Strengthening the quality assurance system to eventually develop joint degrees and international programs.

Hence, adopting a model such as the Bologna Process was a proper approach for the Kosovar society, so that its higher education system could improve and become as competitive as those of countries in the EHEA (MEST, 2015).

2.1.3 The Legal Provisions for Higher Education and the Bologna Process

Until 2003, higher education policy in Kosovo had largely been dormant. The reform of the higher education system started with the adoption of the Bologna Process (Attard, 2009). The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) together with local and international experts in higher education developed documents such as the “Law No.04/L-037 on Higher Education in the Republic Kosovo,” the “Kosovo Education Strategic Plan,” the “Strategy for Development of Higher Education in Kosovo,” and other strategies and administrative regulations based on the principles of the Bologna Process (MEST, 2015). The “Strategy for Development of Higher Education in Kosovo” was adopted in 2004, which put in place clear objectives for the improvement of higher education as part of the Bologna Process. Even in the new “Law No.04/L-037 on Higher Education in the Republic Kosovo,” and the “Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (2017-2021)”, developed by MEST contain “Bologna Process” and “European Higher Education Area” terminology (Attard, 2009). For instance, both the mission and the vision of Kosovo’s Education Strategic Plan were developed based on the Bologna model and Kosovo’s aim of becoming part of the EHEA.

Vision: “Open and democratic society integrated in the European Higher Education Area, where knowledge and research are base for a sustainable cultural, social, and economic development” (Kosovo Bologna Promoters’ Team, 2007).

Mission: “Development of an effective higher education system contributing to the welfare of the Kosovar society by offering a high-quality education and research, with equal opportunities for all, in accordance to the values of liberty, democracy, and diversity” (Kosovo Bologna Promoters’ Team, 2007).

This is important since it recognizes how MEST perceives the implementation of the Bologna Process. It also continues to show how committed the government of Kosovo was to improve the higher education system through the Bologna reform and later becoming part of the EHEA.

2.1.4 The Kosovo Bologna Promoters Team

In order to manage and evaluate the Bologna reform in Kosovo, in March 2001 the Minister of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) established the Committee for Strategy and Reforms, which was later known as the Kosovo Bologna Promoters Team (Kosovo Bologna Promoters Team, 2007). In 2006, the Minister of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) assigned the Kosovo Bologna Promoters Team (KBPT) to oversee the activities that promote the Bologna Process, as well as to work towards the integration of Kosovo in the EHEA. Kosovo Bologna Promoters Team applied for a project within the structural and complementary measures of the Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies Program (TEMPUS) – ‘the Promotion of the Bologna Process in Kosovo’, as a step closer to shifting and improving the higher education system (Attard, 2009).

This project was implemented in a timeframe of one year and involved various stakeholders, in order to develop policy interventions that enable the change. The project encompassed several local and international stakeholders, namely MEST, HEIs such as the University of Prishtina, the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), the University of the Peloponnese (Greece), and over thirty experts in the field of higher education coming from these HEIs. During this time, all the involved stakeholders partook in the activities including study visits, roundtables, discussions, conferences, and workshops, among others (Kosovo Bologna Promoters’ Team, 2007). This project resulted in the development of four Bologna policy documents, as follows:

- MEST Policy on Development of Curricula in Higher Education in Kosovo
- Common Criteria for Implementation of ECTS in Higher Education in Kosovo
- MEST Guidelines on Evaluation of HEIs in Kosovo

- MEST Policy on Recognition and Comparability of Pre-Bologna and Bologna Degrees and Study Programs

These policy documents represented action plans for the transition of the higher education system in Kosovo in compliance with the Bologna model. In addition, it was anticipated that they will be utilized as building blocks by all the players involved in the higher education system towards Kosovo's integration into the EHEA and its development into a more competitive knowledge economy.

2.2 Bologna Process on Quality Assurance Developments in Kosovo

Quality assurance is considered as one of the main pillars of higher education in Europe (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010). “[Q]uality is the basic underlying condition for trust, relevance, mobility, compatibility and attractiveness in the European Higher Education Area” (Prague Communiqué, European Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2001).

The implementation of the Bologna Process in Kosovo identified quality assurance as a building block of the reform of the higher education system. Quality assurance in Kosovo currently comprises two compulsory steps that HEIs should undertake in order to legally operate in Kosovo, namely, licensing and accreditation. Licensing, which is essentially an operating permit, is issued by the Office of Higher Education in Kosovo at the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST). Accreditation is a tool to measure quality and it is granted by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA). KAA is an independent entity that aims to assure that HEIs and their programs cope with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). As a common practice, HEIs should first acquire the accreditation from the KAA and get the license (i.e. the work permit) by MEST.

After the adoption of the Bologna Process, the government was committed to improving the quality of higher education provisions. It became official with the establishment of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) in 2008. Since then, KAA has been responsible for accreditation, re-accreditation, and validation of the programs according to international quality assurance standards. KAA's Board, the National Quality Council members, comprises both international and local experts in order to ensure a transparent and effective evaluation process.

KAA supports the implementation of quality assurance measures at two levels: internal and external. In order to handle both components as efficiently and effectively as possible, KAA cooperates with HEI and supports them in developing and maintaining relevant structures and processes. KAA requires HEI to have quality assurance offices and instruments of internal evaluation. In addition, each HEI should prepare and submit self-evaluation reports in addition to other application documents for their program or institutional accreditation

KAA has continued to work closely with other quality assurance agencies in order to bring best practices to Kosovo. To strengthen the international recognition of standards and quality, KAA became a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA). More importantly, in 2014, KAA became a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) for a period of 5 years (KAA, 2016). KAA was granted full membership due to the positive evaluation from the ENQA board (ENQA, 2016). It is worthwhile mentioning that ENQA accepts applications for membership from quality assurance/ accreditation agencies from countries that are signatory to the Bologna Declaration.

Despite the fact that Kosovo is not an official member of the EHEA, it was granted an opportunity to participate in the ministerial meetings as a ‘special observer’ and became a full member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, thereby unofficially has integrated into the EHEA. ENQA thus modified the requirements and made an exception allowing Kosovo to apply and become part of ENQA. Becoming a part of agencies such as INQAAHE, CEENQA, and ENQA enforces the assurance that accredited, re-accredited, and validated programs are assessed by KAA according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG, 2015). This indicates that KAA’s membership reflects expertise in executing the European principles of quality assurance that, in turn, reflect towards all the HEIs in Kosovo.

KAA’s efforts in improving the quality assurance criteria in evaluating HEI has reflected significantly in the number of accredited HEI. Consequently, during the last round of higher education institutional accreditation in 2015, numerous HEI were not granted re-accreditation (Rexhaj & Pupovci, 2015). That is mainly due to the KAA’s commitment towards conforming to the principles of ESG (KAA, 2016). For instance, the University of Prishtina was not granted accreditation in some of its programs. Even though the University of Prishtina submitted a number of Ph.D. programs for the re-accreditation to the KAA, around half of the submitted Ph.D. programs were not granted accreditation on the grounds that the programs were not in compliance with quality assurance principles (Rexhaj & Pupovci, 2015). KAA is firmly dedicated to not accrediting, re-accrediting, or validating HEIs and their programs which comprise inadequate application documents (KAA, 2016). These improved quality assurance components will assure Kosovar students, academic staff, and all the interested stakeholders that HEI granted accreditation provide exceptional quality provisions (KAA, 2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Purpose

The main purpose of this thesis is to evaluate whether Kosovo's government met its requirements in the area (action line) of quality assurance, as set by the Bologna Process. Kosovo is not an official member of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area (EHEA). However, as Kosovo did not have a structured higher education system before 2001, it decided to adopt the Bologna Process with the aspiration to join the EHEA and the EU in the foreseeable future.

3.2 Data and Method

The study used a mixed method design in order to examine the influence of the Bologna Process on the development of quality assurance mechanisms in the higher education system in Kosovo. It combines content analysis of policy documents, laws, administrative regulations, statutes, and strategies, with semi-structured interviews conducted with higher education experts and civil society representatives. Considering the limited documents available in Kosovo on this topic, the study opted for this mixed method design. There are two main questions that this study aims to address:

Question 1: *How did the Bologna Process influence the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo in the period of 2001 - 2016?*

Considering that Kosovo started to implement the Bologna Process in 2001, this question reveals the Bologna Process influence in the development of quality assurance mechanism from its start to date.

Question 2: *What is the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms on quality assurance in Kosovo?*

There are many stakeholders in the process of quality assurance. This question reveals the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms in quality assurance through identifying the most relevant stakeholders and describing the role they play.

This thesis hypothesized that the Bologna Process had a positive influence in the development of quality assurance mechanisms in Kosovo.

3.2.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a tool that enables the researcher to derive information from the selected and analyzed documents (Yanow, 2007). In this research, it was used for revealing the most frequent concepts related to quality assurance mechanisms and the Bologna Process reform in these texts. The study sampled more than twenty documents describing the Bologna Process and the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo. The selected documents in this corpus are published sources, accessible for the general public. These documents were retrieved from the website of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST), Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), and HEIs. The documents represent a broad range of texts such as policy documents, laws, administrative regulations, statutes, and strategies, related to the Bologna Process and quality assurance in higher education in Europe and in Kosovo.

The following are the key analyzed documents:

- **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG):** This is one of the key documents adopted under the Bologna Process by European Ministers responsible for Higher Education in 2015. As Kosovo recently became part of the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA), one of the main actors in the area of quality assurance in Europe and the lead organisation behind the ESG. This document was analysed in parallel with other documents retrieved from KAA, revealing the change conception that continues to guide KAA after its official join in ENQA.
- **Law No.04/L-037 on Higher Education in the Republic Kosovo** This is the main document that regulates the higher education system in Kosovo during the studies period. The document was analysed through the lens of identifying the Bologna Process features of the Law and the quality assurance developments it triggered.
- **Bologna Process Application Documents for Kosovo:** These application documents unfold Kosovo's efforts in becoming part of the Bologna Process and its efforts to implement the Bologna reform. Analysing these documents conveyed concepts related to Kosovo's effort to change the quality assurance mechanisms.

In order to clearly identify whether the Bologna Process has influenced the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo, the documents were selected from the period 2001-2016. Since Kosovo started to implement the Bologna Process in 2001, this timeframe will unfold the development of quality assurance mechanisms as a result of the Bologna reform. The selected documents were organized chronologically and analyzed accordingly. In analyzing the selected documents, QDA Miner qualitative software was used. The study used deductive coding approach. This analysis brought many broad themes and sub-themes.

3.2.2 Interviews

Content analysis was paired with a series of five semi-structured interviews conducted with higher education experts and the civil society representatives in Kosovo. Each interview was about one-hour long. The interviews were focused on the expert's perspectives regarding the influence of the Bologna Process in the development of the quality assurance component in Kosovo's higher education system. The group of experts dealing with quality in higher education in Kosovo is small. Thus, the snowball sampling strategy was used to identify the interviewees.

Similarly, as with the document analysis, the study used QDA Miner to code the most frequent concepts related to quality assurance mechanisms and the Bologna Process reform that emerged from the transcribed interviews. After structuring the text with different concepts, the study described and interpreted the outcomes. As a final point, interviewees' perspectives provided valuable information on the quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo.

3.2.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

The implementation of the Bologna Process by Kosovo without being a signatory country of the Bologna Declaration makes the case of Kosovo unique. Using content analysis, the study was able to provide insights through the analysis of the texts pertaining to this special case. Considering the limited amount of data with respect to this topic, the study complemented content analysis with semi-structured interviews. A crucial aspect of this research was the willingness of experts to participate.

The advantage of snowballing sampling strategy was that it ‘granted entry’ when dealing with a specific target audience such as experts in quality assurance of higher education in Kosovo. Because there is not enough evidence that studies the influence of the Bologna Process in the development of quality assurance mechanism in Kosovo’s higher education system, there is a need for extensive research. However, due to time and limited financial resources, the research could not extend to additional research perspectives.

3.2.4 Researcher Bias

It is important to recognize the potential for researcher bias. Considering the fact that I have been working for the higher education sector in Kosovo for the past two years, I already have developed certain opinions regarding the Bologna Process and its influence in the development of quality assurance mechanisms. Nevertheless, I have strived to remain impartial and I received the standpoints of the interviewees as given.

4. Results and Discussion

The main purpose of this chapter is to address the two main research questions based on the results of the literature review and evidence collected through interviews, as summarized in this thesis. The research questions are: how the Bologna Process influenced the development of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo in the period of 2001–2016, and what is the actual impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms in quality assurance in Kosovo. An important finding discussed in this chapter is that the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo was the legal basis for the establishment, along the Bologna Process lines, of a quality assistance system in Kosovo with three main components: Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), external quality assurance and internal quality assurance. The chapter is divided into three main sections. Each section first describes the establishment and the scope of the respective quality assurance components. A discussion follows about how each of these three quality assurance components has influenced HEIs and their operations. Additionally, each section discusses further steps to be taken regarding each component, in order to strengthen compliance with quality assurance requirements in Kosovo's higher education system. Lastly, the sections provide the researcher's discussion of the findings.

4 Quality Assurance Components in Kosovo's Higher Education System

As highlighted by the all interviewees, the Bologna Process has had a great impact on the development of quality assurance components in higher education in Kosovo. There was a clear consensus among the interviewees that the first impact was on the drafting of the Law on Higher Education. In 2002, the Law on Higher Education was drafted according to the Bologna Process objectives by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)² in cooperation with local experts (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013). In light of this, the Law on Higher Education, which was passed in 2003, included quality assurance as a significant component of higher education in Kosovo. The term used in the law to refer to quality in higher education was “accreditation” (The Law on Higher Education, 2003). The Law on Higher Education identified the formation of an accreditation body that will oversee the quality assurance in Kosovo's higher education (The Law on Higher Education, 2003).

The powerful influence of the Bologna reform can be seen in the drafting of the Law in Higher Education and the emergence of its quality assurance components. Consistent with the Bologna reform, the Law on Higher Education led to the establishment of the three main components: Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), external quality assurance and internal quality assurance. This was the main vehicle for translating the Bologna model in Kosovo's national higher education system (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013).

² UNMIK was established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1244, which was passed on 10 June 1999. In that Resolution, the UN decided to "[deploy] in Kosovo, under United Nations auspices, [an] international civil and security [presence]".

4.1 Theme 1 Quality Assurance Agencies

4.1.1 Establishment of KAA

“KAA is one of the first quality assurance components put in place as a result of the Bologna reform” (Interviewee 1). KAA was officially established in 2008, when the Minister of Education Enver Hoxhaj appointed Ferdiqe Zhishi as the President of the National Council of Quality (i.e. KAA board), even though the preceding Minister of Education Agim Veliu has established the first, albeit non-official, board of the National Council of Quality (NCQ) led by Ramadan Zejnullahu in 2006/7 in accordance with the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo (KAA Evaluation Report, 2013). The board of the NCQ, appointed by MEST, is the responsible body that governs the operations of KAA (KAA, 2017; MEST, 2017). It is essential to note that Article 7 of the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo regulates the functioning of KAA and defines the mandate of the officials and officers working for this body (Law on Higher Education in Kosovo, 2011). The National Council of Quality has nine members, three of whom are internationals and the rest local experts in higher education, while KAA is comprised of five officers and the executive director (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013; KAA Report, 2016, KAA, 2017).

KAA is an institution, which make possible to use certain external quality assurance mechanisms. KAA is considered a quality assurance component/tool that is in charge of external quality assurance process, using a few mechanisms (accreditation, audit) and specific tools or instruments such as external evaluators.

The KAA's accreditation procedures can be summarized in four steps as follows:

- Step 1: Receiving a Self-Evaluation Report from each higher education institution undergoing accreditation
- Step 2: Organising external evaluation by a group of experts, including a site-visit to the institution
- Step 3: Accreditation decision from the National Quality Council and publication of the evaluation report
- Step 4: Perform the follow up procedure and improvement plan with HEIs

With the establishment of KAA, all HEIs and their study programs had to undergo accreditation processes, namely accreditation, re-accreditation, and validation (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013). HEIs undergoing initial accreditation and are obliged to apply for re-accreditation in the next round after the first procedure (i.e. after 3-5 years). International HEIs that want to operate in Kosovo and have accreditation from an external body must undergo a validation process (KAA, 2017). The accreditation decisions of KAA are binding for all HEIs operating in Kosovo (KAA, 2017).

4.1.2 Influence of KAA in Higher Education Institutions

There is a consensus among the interviewees that many developments towards quality assurance mechanisms in higher education in Kosovo ensued after the establishment of KAA. Since its establishment in 2008, KAA has been dedicated to ensuring full compliance of its operations with the ESG (Interviewees 1 and 2). KAA is part of ENQA as of 2014 (KAA, 2017). In light of this, KAA tries to follow the same approaches on quality assurance as the EHEA countries (MEST, 2017).

KAA representatives highlight the following: agency's independence, compliance, and collaboration as the main positive features.

Independence

First, there was a consensus among the interviewees arguing that KAA acts as an independent agency. KAA representatives argue that KAA's independence is a highly significant component as defined by ENQA (Interviewees 1 and 2). Both KAA and NCQ exercise their independence by deciding on accreditation matters independent of other stakeholders (External Review of KAA, 2014). This has been confirmed through a letter send by the chair of KAA review panel to the President of ENQA upon the external review of KAA (2014). The letter concludes that although Kosovo is still undergoing transition, KAA has managed to act as an independent body on accreditation of HEIs and related matters (Letter of KAA Review to ENQA, 2014).

Compliance

Second, KAA representatives confirm that ESG are transmitted to HEIs according to ENQA's principles (Interviewees 1 and 2). In order to keep up with the ESG, KAA organizes information sessions, training, and conferences for HEIs both individually and altogether (KAA, 2017). During these informative activities, it ensures that the culture of quality is spread across HEIs by introducing the necessity of compliance with the ESG (Interviewees 1 and 2).

Collaboration

Third, KAA values collaboration with other quality assurance entities from the EHEA countries (Interviewees 1 and 2). There was a consensus among the interviewees that KAA is dedicated to continuing its collaboration with international experts and European partners to develop

Kosovo's higher education policies at a quality resembling other EHEA countries, so that one day, Kosovo will become an official member of this community.

4.1.3 Further Work for KAA

KAA representatives recognize that despite its tremendous influence operating as one of the quality assurance components in Kosovo, there is still to be done in this direction. Table 1 on the SWOT analysis for KAA reveals the weaknesses and threats to the agency. That is why, KAA aims to improve and develop the quality assurance components and processes further. In light of this, the following is one of the KAA's main objectives in the coming years (KAA Report, 2016).

Monitoring and Follow-up Procedures

In accordance with Article 7, point 2 of the Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Kosovo Nr. 04 / L-037, and Article 27, Item 1 of the Administrative Instruction on Accreditation of HEIs in Kosovo Nr. 02/2013, KAA is mandated to carry out monitoring and inspection of HEIs. However, KAA staff does not perform field monitoring on a regular basis due to lack of human capacity. At the NQC meeting held on the 6th of July 2016, NQC has taken a decision to take over all actions by KAA for the monitoring of accredited HEIs in accordance with the legislation in force. According to this decision, monitoring will start from the 2016/17 academic year and will be organized twice during each academic year. KAA has prepared the monitoring plan for the end of 2016 and for 2017 and is expected to implement the NQC decision from December 2016.

4.1.4 Discussion of Findings

The evidence collected during the research reveals that the Bologna Process influenced the development of KAA as the regulatory body in charge of assuring compliance with quality assurance criteria across HEIs in Kosovo. The majority of the interviewees concur that KAA as an agency responded to the European trends by ensuring compliance with the ESG in Kosovo's higher education system (Interviewees 1, 2, 5). It is important to note, however, that the study is focused on the period of 2001–2016. KAA was only established in 2008 and it started its operations soon thereafter. No official mechanism similar to KAA has existed before that period in Kosovo's higher education system. This delay is understandable when considering that Kosovo at the time was a post-conflict country, lacking human and financial resources, and the UNMIK together with Kosovo's government aimed at building the entire higher education system from scratch. This finding suggests that the pre-2008 can be distinguished as being a 'passive' period, while as of 2008, the implementation of quality assurance mechanism was activated.

The evidence indicates that after KAA's establishment all HEIs were obliged to undergo accreditation. This shows the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms in quality assurance in Kosovo. In addition, the findings of the study highlight that no higher education institution is eligible to operate without undergoing the accreditation process. This finding elucidates that KAA has the authority to maintain checks and balances in HEIs operations through the accreditation process.

It is worthwhile noting that although KAA is under the umbrella of MEST, the NCQ decides on accreditation matters independently of other actors involved in higher education.

This could be interpreted as a significant step of KAA's governing abilities in becoming a model accreditation agency. At the same time, this could help the Kosovar society perceive KAA as a reliable entity that handles the accreditation of HEIs.

As evidence shows, KAA identifies a substantial amount to work that still needs to be done. At a more general level, findings discussed in this chapter show how the Bologna reforms led KAA to sharing the same values as the EHEA countries agencies in continuing to address the quality component in Kosovo's higher education system.

4.2 Theme 2 External Quality Assurance

4.2.1 Overview of External Quality Assurance

All of the interviewees confirmed that external evaluation is another quality assurance process brought by the Bologna Process. It is regulated through the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo and the ESG. The establishment of KAA in 2008 marked the functionalization of external evaluation in Kosovo's higher education system (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013). According to the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo, external evaluators should be international professionals (Law on Higher Education in Kosovo, 2011). External evaluators are a group of European experts that conduct the external evaluation of HEIs operating in Kosovo (KAA, 2017). "The significance of having foreign external evaluators is that the comments and opinions they provide are unbiased and very direct" (Interviewee 1). In other words, they are not in any way influenced by the local society. There was a clear consensus among interviewees that there are two processes under external quality assurance brought by the Bologna Process, namely external quality assurance of study programs and external quality assurance of HEIs.

4.2.2 Influence of External Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions

External Quality Assurance for Study Programs and Higher Education Institutions

As of 2009, after KAA's establishment, it is compulsory to appoint the external evaluators group both for the evaluation of study programs and HEIs. In line with this obligation, KAA selected a group of experts whom are appointed according to their field of specialty (KAA, 2017). KAA's partner agencies in Europe proposed a list of quality assurance experts, from which the panels of experts were selected (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013). The selected international experts were first shortlisted by the Executive Director of KAA, while the final selection was made by the board of NCQ.

The selected international experts conduct the external evaluation of HEIs (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013). The experts are obliged to work in line with the following provisions: Law on Higher Education in Kosovo, Administrative Instruction for Accreditation of HEIs in the Republic of Kosovo, KAA Guidelines for experts for institutions. The groups of experts prepare a report upon the completion of external evaluation of HEIs (Guidelines for Experts, 2010). The report is afterwards sent to KAA and NCQ for the final accreditation decision (KESP Evaluation Report, 2015). All of the interviewees referred to the start of external evaluation as the beginning of the functionalization of the external quality assurance mechanism in Kosovo's higher education system.

4.2.3 Further Work for External Evaluators

The fact that all external evaluators are internationals is a unique case in Kosovar higher education. Even though some voices in Kosovo suggested that the external evaluators should

be mixed (i.e. comprising both local and international experts), others argued that “Kosovo society has not matured yet to provide a wholly local set of evaluators, let alone mixed” (Interviewee 2). However, KAA in cooperation with these international external evaluators is trying to strengthen the quality assurance component in Kosovo’s higher education system. Their further work involves raising awareness among HEIs. KAA representatives are thus confident that in the coming years, once they see fit, local experts might be able to join the group of external evaluators.

4.2.4 Discussion of Findings

All experts argued that the Bologna Process influenced the development of the external quality assurance in higher education in Kosovo. There was a consensus among the interviewees that the main Bologna influence is the initiation of the external evaluation and its processes according to ESG standards and guidelines for external quality assurance for both degree programs and HEIs.

It should be noted that although the Law in Higher Education distinguished the accreditation process as an important component of quality assurance in higher education (Law on Higher Education in Kosovo, 2003), KAA and external quality assurance was not established until 2008 (KAA, 2017). However, the evidence suggested that this did not stop the reform in higher education as of 2008, when KAA was established. It provides support for the argument that Bologna-influenced reform is perceived as positive development with regarding to external evaluation of Kosovo’s HEIs.

All of the interviewees confirmed that once the external quality assurance was developed, it grew according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. This indicates that Kosovo’s quality assurance in higher education is

reforming based on the European values. It is important to point out that the external evaluators comprise only internationals. The implication of this finding is that there is no absolute trust in local expert's due to the suspicion of favoritism. However, some of the interviewees suggest that as the trust is being built steadily, shortly the group will be able to acquire the expertise of local professionals (Interviewees 1 and 2).

4.3 Theme 3 Internal Quality Assurance

4.3.1 Establishment of Internal Quality Assurance

The internal evaluation is another quality assurance process brought by the Bologna Process that is regulated through the Law on Higher Education in Kosovo and the ESG. All of the interviewees reinforced this observation. The University of Prishtina was the first University that started the implementation of the internal quality assurance (KESP 2017-2021). In February 2008, the project entitled "Establishment of the Quality Assurance Office at the University of Prishtina" marked the foundation of the quality assurance unit that was responsible to conduct the internal evaluation of the University (KAA Self-Evaluation Report, 2013). After the University of Prishtina, other HEIs followed suit.

Depending on the size of the HEIs, the structure of the internal quality assurance can comprise the quality assurance unit, the quality assurance committee, the self-evaluation committee, and the peer review groups that are in charge to oversee the internal quality assurance. While not all HEIs have the same structure of the internal quality assurance groups, the assigned officers conduct the internal quality assurance in harmony to the ESG Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance (Interviewee 3 and 4).

The committees at each higher education institution are responsible for endorsing quality assurance components at the institution, keeping the institution under review, addressing MEST and KAA requirements related to quality assurance and enhancement, maintaining the international standards on good quality assurance practice of the institutions, providing the necessary information on quality assurance mechanisms across the HEIs, and reviewing institutional guidelines for internal quality assurance (Interviewee 3 and 4). The end product of the internal evaluation can take the form of the self-evaluation report that afterwards HEIs submit to KAA along with the application for accreditation (KAA, 2017).

4.3.2 Influence of the Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions

There is a consensus among the interviewees that many developments across HEIs in Kosovo that followed after the introduction of internal quality assurance are the result of the Bologna Process. As previously highlighted, self-evaluation report is a quality assurance tool that is compiled by the responsible quality assurance officers/administrators at the HEIs after an internal evaluation is conducted (KAA, 2017). This process keeps the checks and balances of ESG s on internal quality assurance. As identified by the interviewees, the compilation of the Self-Evaluation Report requires the use of different instruments such as surveys and scholar's publications on scientific journals, among others, as means to conclude the report (Interviewees 3 and 4)

Surveys

In order to control the quality of academic and administrative activities, the institutions utilize mainly three ways of quality assessment instruments: questionnaires for academic staff, administrative staff questionnaires, and student questionnaires (KAA Report, 2016). In

addition, there was a consensus among the interviewees that as long as there are instruments in place based on the ESG, this process will improve even further to resemble the EHEA HEIs.

Publications in Scientific Journals

There are additional quality assurance tools employed by HEIs. The quality of research activities of academic staff is measured through their publications in scientific journals with international peer review and participation in scientific conferences in Kosovo and abroad (KAA, 2017). Academic staff promotion is based on the number of published works in journals with international peer review. KAA representatives confirm that after the last accreditation in 2014, progress was made in this instrument by some, but not all of, the HEIs (interviewees 1 and 2).

4.3.3 Further Work for Higher Education Institutions

Most of the interviewees suggested that, although internal evaluation has enhanced compliance with Bologna-generated quality assurance criteria, further work needs to be undertaken by higher education providers in Kosovo (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, and 5). Among many points that interviewees discussed, the shift of responsibility for quality assurance from KAA to HEIs themselves and enhancing student involvement was emphasized (Interviewees 1, 2, and 5).

Responsibility of Higher Education Institutions

Feedback obtained from participants during this study indicate their conviction that quality assurance should be fundamental responsibility of the HEIs themselves. KAA representatives argue that KAA's role is to guide and assist HEIs during the accreditation process by conveying the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, but it is in the scope of HEIs to maintain the quality of their provisions.

One of the interviewees confirmed the following:

“If I were to identify the main stakeholders that should handle quality assurance in higher education, I would say that students, academic, administrative staff, and overall HEIs should be the main actors responsible as opposed to the governing bodies” (Interviewee 1).

This statement indicates that quality assurance should fall under the responsibility of HEIs.

Even though the Bologna Process reforms brought institutional autonomy to higher education, it appears that, in some instances, HEIs are still not ready to take advantage of the available autonomy (Interviewee 5). HEIs are satisfied with handling the administrative/logistical dimension of autonomy (e.g. staff salaries). However, when it comes to more macro level, strategic decision making, they are not ready to involve themselves just yet (Interviewees 1, 2 and 5). They go back to ask KAA on how to hire academic staff, indicating they are not taking responsibility for important aspects of their own operations (Interviewees 1 and 2).

To a certain extent, the problem with HEIs is that they do not see the broader picture of the Bologna reform with respect to quality assurance components (Interviewee 5). While it is evident that the Bologna Process has had significant influence on the development of the internal quality assurance mechanism in higher education in Kosovo, it has also created a perception that HEIs should only follow guidance and criteria from the outside, from KAA, while not perceiving themselves as the main stakeholders in this process (Interviewees 1, 2 and 5). The main objective of the Bologna Process, however, is to institutionalize quality in higher education not only through formal criteria per se, but root it in the values system of HEIs (Interviewees 1, 2 and 5). Thus, HEIs should recognize they are the main stakeholders responsible for the quality component in higher education in Kosovo.

Enhance Student Involvement

There is a lack of student involvement in quality assurance in HEIs (Interviewees 1, 2, and 5). Students are required to fill-out a set of surveys that serve a great deal of purpose when it comes to satisfying the quality assurance components. However, when it comes to the decision making, there is a clear lack of involvement (Interviewees 1, 2 and 5). There is a vague perception with regards to students being one of the main stakeholders in higher education. But, the problem is that students themselves resist treating quality assurance as something that needs to come from them as well. In other words, they still do things because it is required of them, not because they see it as something important for quality assurance of the institutions they are attending (Interviewee 5). That is why, some of the experts suggest that there is a need for awareness raising towards shifting the responsibilities to students as one of the main actors in quality assurance in Kosovo's higher education system (Interviewees 1 and 2).

4.3.4 Discussion of Findings

The evidence discussed in this chapter reveals that the Bologna Process had an impact on the development of the internal quality assurance mechanism across HEIs in Kosovo. As indicated by all the interviewees, HEIs are following the Bologna standards and guidelines (ESG) for internal quality assurance in conducting the internal evaluation. This shows that the impact of the Bologna-influenced reforms is demonstrated through compliance with internal quality assurance standards from HEIs.

All HEIs conduct a substantial amount of work during the internal evaluation. As noted, the project "Establishment of the Quality Assurance Office at the University of Prishtina" in 2008 was the first attempt in initiating the internal evaluation across HEIs. However, this shows that before 2008, there was no official and standardized internal quality assurance mechanism in Kosovo's higher education system.

And as of 2008, all HEIs should evaluate their internal operations through a standardized process. The implication of this evidence is that this requirement harmonized the internal quality assurance across HEIs.

As presented, all the interviewees identified further work that needs to be done by HEIs. The results suggest that although the Bologna Process has had significant influence on the development of the internal quality assurance mechanism in higher education in Kosovo, it influenced the perception that HEIs are only obliged to satisfy the criteria instead of taking lead. This means that HEIs, although compliant to quality assurance requirements, they fail to go beyond satisfying the technical aspects of the criteria and to address the higher goals of quality such as learning outcomes, students experience, career guidance, employability, among others. KAA is thus trying to shift the responsibility, so that HEIs recognize they are the main stakeholders in Kosovo's higher education system with respect to quality assurance. This will enable HEIs to share the same values regarding quality component with institutions as the EHEA countries.

Conclusion

The Bologna Process has had a great impact on the development of quality assurance components, tools, and mechanisms in Kosovo. In the Balkans region, Kosovo was one of the first countries to adopt the Bologna Process (2001) as a means of improving quality in higher education and address specific societal needs (Attard, 2009). Despite the fact that Kosovo is not an official member of the EHEA, it was granted an opportunity to participate in the ministerial meetings as a special observer and became a full member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, thereby unofficially it has integrated into the EHEA (BFUG, 2007). This unlocked the possibilities for the government and HEIs to approach international donor organizations and European partners for technical assistance and capacity building on quality assurance related matters.

The main purpose of this thesis was to evaluate whether Kosovo's government had met its stated objectives in the area (action line) of quality assurance, which were voluntarily set with a look at the Bologna Process. This thesis contributes to the existing scholarly literature by being the first to examine the influence of the Bologna Process on the development of quality assurance components, tools, and mechanisms in higher education system in Kosovo. The findings presented will benefit all stakeholders dealing with quality assurance in Kosovo's higher education system.

The evidence reviewed in this thesis shows that a common practice introduced by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology has been to use Bologna as a source of inspiration for and also as a means to legitimize the proposed reforms.

Among the documents developed as per the Bologna model, the Law on Higher Education, together with related strategies and administrative regulations were the building blocks towards the development of the three quality assurance components in 2008, namely the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA), the external quality assurance, and the internal quality assurance. Kosovo became part of ENQA in 2015, which provided a path for improving the quality assurance in higher education as per the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Following a fifteen-year period of implementation of the Bologna Process in Kosovo, the countless transformations achieved during this time appear to be a positive and fruitful experience. As the thesis hypothesized, the Bologna Process has contributed significantly to the development of quality assurance in higher education in Kosovo.

It is important to highlight that the study is focused on the period of 2001–2016. Although Kosovo started to implement the Bologna Process in 2001, the KAA was established in 2008, which marked a major milestone in the development and implementation of quality assurance components. KAA was established with the aim of introducing the culture of quality assurance across HEIs. It provided a framework for setting up the external and the internal quality assurance. It must be emphasized that no official quality assurance mechanism had existed before the early 2000s in Kosovo's higher education system. Considering that Kosovo at the time was a post-conflict country lacking in human and financial resources, this delay can be justified as the UNMIK, together with Kosovo's government, had to build the entire higher education system from scratch. As of 2008, the development of three quality assurance components (i.e. the establishment of KAA, the external and internal quality assurance) obliged all HEIs to undergo accreditation. No higher education institution is permitted to operate in Kosovo without undergoing the accreditation/re-accreditation, or the validation processes.

As this research has shown, the Bologna Process influenced the development of and compliance with quality assurance criteria across HEIs in Kosovo. Thus, research points to two particular outcomes that require further attention.

First, the evidence suggests that KAA is an independent entity that aims to assure that HEIs and their programs adhere to the ESG. Although KAA is perceived as a reliable entity that handles the accreditation of HEIs, the fact that external experts are only internationals is worrisome. The main reason this is happening is because the belief that local experts still work according to their preference towards various HEIs and are considered biased. It is therefore essential that trust be built, so that national experts be involved and the international external evaluators may acquire the expertise of local professionals and, subsequently, the process be conducted with an array of competence domains.

Second, although the Bologna Process is distinguished as a positive reform that fosters compliance, it has also formed a mechanical behavior among HEIs regarding compliance with the quality assurance criteria. It has triggered a construct where HEIs are merely obliged to satisfy formal criteria instead of being the main stakeholder with respect to quality assurance and initiating quality assurance processes. This observation can be interpreted as HEIs only sternly comply with these criteria, without considering going beyond technical and formal requirements. The ESG, require more than just the reinforcement of formal standards and guidelines (ESG, 2015). They are a tool that aim to involve all stakeholders to work together in enhancing quality assurance. In order to enhance quality in higher education, cooperation among all the stakeholders that partake in Kosovo's higher education system is crucial. The evidence collected by this study revealed that the main stakeholders—beyond KAA and MEST—should be HEIs themselves, comprising students, academic, and administrative staff.

In light of this, it is necessary that KAA raise awareness among HEIs so that they recognize they are the main stakeholders in Kosovo's higher education system with respect to quality assurance. HEIs should take initiative and involve themselves in enhancing quality assurance. A shift of responsibilities is necessary to complete successfully the reform.

Given the unique status of Kosovo, the EHEA countries should consider new possibilities for further involvement of Kosovo in their joint activities. Ultimately, the assistance provided by EHEA structures could be expanded, with the aim that in the long-run Kosovo may become an equal partner. The commitment Kosovo has demonstrated in using European guidelines to address higher education matters may be indicative of how it would welcome other processes that aid the integration of the country into the European Union family.

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