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Policy Brief

**How To customise curricula To
Job Market Needs in a context of
unprecedented global change?**

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*Lessons Learned From the SmartAL
Study Programme Supporting Territory
Reform In Albania*

November 2020

This policy brief proposes a sequenced path methodological framework that universities and other vocational education institutions in Albania and other Balkan Countries experiencing territory reforms and the decentralisation process can use for similar studies regarding the job market need in public and private sectors and prior to the construction of a curriculum.

Summary

The digital transformation of the economy and the current innovation-oriented labour market requires an essential effort from all the actors in society, especially Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This demand becomes urgent in developing countries facing new and updated challenges from the job market. Similarly, academics agree that because of technological disruption and Artificial Intelligence, there is no clear view how the job market will evolve for the first time in history. However, it is a widely accepted solution among stakeholders that on-life learning must adapt to the changes. In this context, the education offers must be attractive and relevant to the job market's needs. HEIs should be equipped with the appropriate methodologies that provide a sound basis for the program design. Currently, the lack of an institutionalised methodology in job market needs identification is one of the remaining pitfalls that need to be addressed to assure the quality of the study program. Thus, the institutionalisation of the methodology that the HEIs might follow in the design of the study program will help universities design study programs that fulfil the current needs, allow the ongoing analysis of the study programme, and facilitate the benchmarking process in the domestic job market and abroad. The participatory approach and the governance around the study program building process will also enable the concertation process and social innovations that will hold to the dynamic changes of the job market.

Keywords: Job market needs, Methodology, Territory reform, Green Deal Agenda, Skills, Albania

Introduction

Nothing has affected education as profoundly as the advent and implementation of technology in higher education (Peres et al., 2019). The focus of society in the 21st century will be knowledge-based, and academics, industry and other stakeholders acknowledge that there is no clear view of the job market in the upcoming years because of the technological disruption. Consequently, academia worldwide is making significant efforts to be competitive in two directions. Firstly, customise the teaching environment according to the students' needs by using Artificial Intelligence (AI)¹ and Big Data². According to (Moreira et al., 2017), the technologies mentioned above will allow the development of new decision support systems based on evidence of analysis of the behaviour and feelings of students and teachers by analysing their behaviour and activity patterns and adapting them students. Secondly, to customise the study programs according to the job market needs. This is crucial in a dynamic era of technological disruption, especially in developing countries, because on the one hand, the prospects of AI in the economy domain include: enhancing productivity and innovation, reducing costs and increasing resources, but at the other hand, AI involve, having an unstable job market, losing revenue streams and employment, and generating economic inequality (Yigitcanlar et al., 2021). In this vein, in order to have a sustainable use of the potentials of the technological disruption, active collaboration among an inclusive range of stakeholders—i.e. in the form of quadruple helix model participation of academia, public, private, and the community—is a necessity to build study program that tackles the new emerged needs.

Higher education in developing countries often suffers from minimal connection to the work market. Generally, the information imparted to higher education students during their study programmes is limited in theoretical and practical elements (Gondwe & Walenkamp, 2011). This statement relates to a larger and more general question regarding the current role and organisation of the university. The question posed asks whether the university should in the future become an 'ivory tower' or a 'convenience store' (Claes, 2005). The latter is considered to dominate the higher education system of the majority of developing countries. The gaps between the HEI study programme offer and job market increases unemployment or force graduates to enter the unskilled/temporary job market (Gebel & Giesecke, 2011). Young workers are even more at risk of unemployment compared to other population groupings. This trend is even more evident during economic fluctuations (Caliendo et al., 2011). Studies on employability show that 'workers have higher earnings when they are in occupations that match their educational level and field of study, but the size of this earnings boost depends

1 AI can be defined as machines or computers that mimic cognitive functions that humans associate with the human mind, such as learning and problem solving.

2 "Big Data technologies describes the new generation of technologies and architectures, designed to economically extract value from very large volumes of a wide variety of data, by enabling the High-velocity capture, discovery, and/or analysis, Mayer-Schönberger, V., & Cukier, K. (2013). Big data: A revolution that will transform how we live, work, and think. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

on the clarity and strength of the pathway between their educational credential and the labour market' (Bol et al., 2019). The authors further contend that the educational match with the job market, and the strength of this linkage, is related to at least two factors: i) educational credentials and ii) the type of higher education system developed in a specific country. Educational credentials are related to the link that exists between the education provided and the job market need. These links may be affected by several factors like the type of education; some fields of education are much narrower and have a more vital link with the job market than others, e.g. medicine vs political science studies. At the national level, the links between education and the job market are related to the characteristics of the education system or generic education vs vocational education.

Youth unemployment is a central issue in Mediterranean countries and is even more urgent where many young populations are not employed (Eichhorst & Neder, 2014). In the Western Balkans (WB), there is an important gap between the skills of new graduates and the job market demand. According to (Bartlett & Uvalić, 2019), only one out of three new graduates in countries in the WB has the skills required in the job market. Similarly, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2015) notes that youth unemployment in Albania is twice as high as other working-age groups at the national level. This can be attributed to several factors. According to (Lamo & Messina, 2010), post-socialist countries have a higher mismatch between education and the job market offer. In the WB, less than one employee out of two (48%) is adequately matched in education and the job market demand (Bartlett & Uvalić, 2019). Albania follows this general trend, with 46% of employees working in job positions matching the education level of employees and the rest, 54%, having an education level above or below the job market requirements (Bartlett & Uvalić, 2019). In many cases, HEIs in Albania cannot obtain this information to use it in order to produce labour market-based study programmes. They lack an institutionalised methodology that produces an inventory of competencies and skills needed from the marketplace that can be used to design the study programs. The need for a structured shared market needs identification platform is crucial in a changing and dynamic context linked firstly with administrative-territorial reform and secondly with Albania's European Union approximation agenda. The following paragraphs will present the relevance of this policy brief regarding the legislation, and the recommendations on the institutionalised roadmap of skills identification in the marketplace in developing countries (Balkan Countries) applied to Albania.

Relevance to legislation changes and EU Policy agenda

Albania has undertaken important reform that has completely modified its territory planning process from the traditional urban planning approach to a more holistic one referred to as territorial planning and development. For a long time, spatial planning in Albania has been characterised by a highly hierarchical system where national interests are prioritised over local concerns (Cotella & Berisha, 2016). The fall of the Soviet bloc and the Europeanisation process paved the way to new laws (from 1993 to 2014) that address the logic of territory

administration, perceived as a technical and regulative process through which urban-rural territorial development are addressed. The last law approved (Law 115/2014) reduced the number of first-level local units to 61 municipalities. This territorial consolidation establishes the economies of scale through which the larger local government units can provide more effective and cost-efficient services. In the same vein, it aims to answer the requirements of the European Union (EU) integration process by setting up an administrative structure capable of efficiently managing the pre-accession process. However, the local and central administration has limited knowledge of sustainable territory administration's holistic vision of urban and rural areas, including their interactions.

Similarly, increasing interest in reducing environmental impact endorsed in the European Green Deal (European Union, 2020) and The Green Agenda for the WB³, sets out concrete recommendations to 1)*Align the region with the EU's 2050 ambition to make Europe a carbon-neutral continent*, 2)*Unlock the potential of circular economy*, 3)*Fight pollution of air, water and soil*, 4)*Promote sustainable methods of food production and supply*, and 5)*Exploit the vast tourism potential of the region, focusing on biodiversity protection and restoration of ecosystems*. The above mentioned political context requires specialised and new methodological tools to perform these new tasks.

In parallel with the use of technologies that develop new decision support systems having the students and its behaviour in the centre, the same, developing countries such as Albania might use an institutionalised roadmap that activates stakeholder participation in identifying the job market's needs.

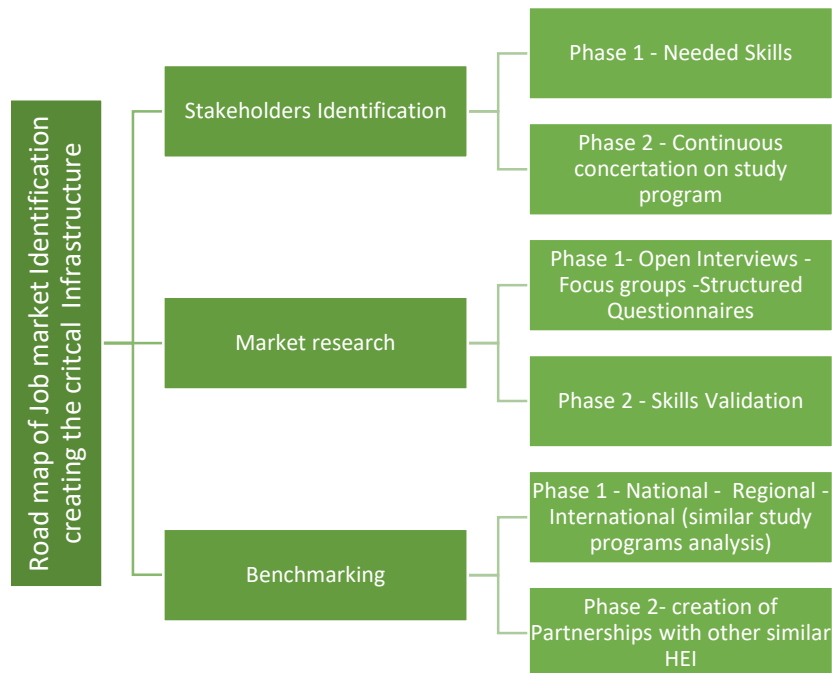
The following paragraph presents the Albanian context regarding the identification of needed skills in the newly created context.

The relevance of institutionalised job market needs methodology

This policy brief proposes a sequenced path methodological framework that universities and other vocational education institutions in Albania and other Balkan Countries experiencing territory reforms and the decentralisation process can use for similar studies regarding the job market need in public and private sectors.

³ Envisaged by the European Green Deal, was endorsed at the Summit in Sofia, 10th November 2020 by the WB leaders.

Figure 1: The methodological framework of job market needs assessment



Source: Authors

The methodological approach is not based on identifying discrepancies between the actual skills and importance of needed skills, but rather on a participatory approach based on three consecutive steps: i) Stakeholder mapping, ii) Market research and iii) Benchmarking. Each step is developed in two phases. Considering the first step, phase one targets sector participants to identify the new job market needs in a participatory process. Phase two aims the creation of the social architecture (quadruple helix) that will enable continuous participation in skills validation, and ongoing study program follow-up. The creation of the social innovation will activate the stakeholders around a given study program to participate in the update process of the study programme according to the job market needs.

In the second step, market research is developed by using several instruments such as open interviews. The open interviews allow creating a significant pooling of skills that will be evaluated through closed questionnaires that offer the perceptions of different participants regarding the level of proficiency required. The mapping of perceptions of the required skills allows adapting the study program accordingly. Also, in this step, it is vital to validate the skills of the stakeholders to minimise the noise in the study program design.

The third step developed the benchmarking process to analyse similar study programs at a national, regional and international level. The benchmarking objective is twofold: first, to map the existing study program that covers the same field of knowledge and secondly, to identify future partners in the co-construction of future study programs. Similarly, the first one will give an outside view of the skills and study programs applied abroad, a necessary step to undertake considering the globalisation of the job market.

Currently, in Albania, the legal framework that enables the licencing and accreditation of the study programmes, in general, does not specify the universities' roadmap to identify the needs. Thus, the institutionalisation of the methodology that the HEIs might follow in the design of the study program will help universities design study programs that fulfil the current needs, allow the ongoing analysis of the study programme, and facilitate the benchmarking process in the domestic job market and abroad. The participatory approach will also enable the concertation process in the continuous improvement of the study programmes.

Recommendations

- The essential use of a methodological framework for assessing job market needs as a prerequisite for constructing a study program.
- The institutionalisation of the methodology by HEIs for the study program's design that responds to current and future needs.
- The creation of an institutionalized digital job market research platform by the HEIs for their needs is an important step that will assure the quality and the relevance of the study programs in developing countries. Creating this platform through the common good principle will assist as a critical infrastructure that will enable the institutionalisation of the governance and participation around the study program design and follow up.
- The participatory approach and the governance around the study program building process will also enable the concertation process and social innovations that will hold to the dynamic changes of the job market.

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