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REVIEW OF THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK AND PROVISION OF POST-SECONDARY AND HIGHER VET IN ALBANIA

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Acronyms

AD	Associate Degree
AQF	Albanian Qualifications Framework
ASCAL	Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DCM	Decision of the Council of Ministers
EC	European Commission
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EQF	European Qualification Framework
EU	European Union
GPA	Grade Points Average
HAVO	Hoger Algemeen Voortgezet Onderwijs (Dutch: General secondary education)
HBO	Hoger Beroepsonderwijs (Dutch - Higher Vocational Education)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HVE	Higher Vocational Education
ICM	International Credit Mobility
LLL	Life-long learning
MBO	Middelbaar Beroeps Onderwijs (Dutch – secondary vocational education)
MFC	Multifunctional Vocational Education and Training Centres
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoFE	Ministry of Finance and Economy
NAES	National Agency for Employment and Skills
NAVETQ	National Agency for Vocational Education, Training and Qualifications
NCVET	National Council for Vocational Education and Training
NSSTD	National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PET	Professional Education and Training
SD4E	Skills Development for Employment
SSC	Sector Skills Committees
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	Western Balkans
WBL	Work-based learning
WLP	Work Life Partners

Executive Summary

Western Balkans is one of the regions with higher unemployment in Europe, especially for recent graduates, which is one of the important reasons for the massive outflow of young people from the Balkan countries. The vertical mismatch between educational attainment and employment of graduates is still very high in WB countries, amounting to about 47%, which has to do with the insufficient orientation of education to the needs of the labour market and especially with the very weak practical training of students.

Despite positive developments during the last five years, i.e., a decrease in unemployment (INSTAT, Labour Force Survey) the general unemployment rate for all age groups of the labour force (> 15 years) remains at a higher level of 11.9%. Moreover, the share of young people aged 15-24 who are neither educated nor employed remains very high at 26 % and is highest in the Western Balkans region, while the average for the Western Balkans is around 21 % and for the EU around 10.5 %. Additionally, the level of adult participation in life-long learning (LLL) programs is very low (<10%).

International experiences show that post-secondary education and training is a pertinent and valuable educational option, contributing to better skills of young students without work experience, and employees who want to improve their educational levels to gain a better position in the job market. International experiences also show that post-secondary professional programs systems require proper regulation and adequate attention from the public authorities in the field of education to make them visible and recognised. A critical point is that educational institutions and employers must work together to ensure that education programmes are relevant for the present and future skills needs of employers.

However, while the number of post-secondary study programs and enrolled students continues to grow, the Albanian practice falls short on all three accounts: regulation is imperfect, attention from public authorities is insufficient and the relationships between educational institutions and employers are minimal. There is insufficient orientation of education to the needs of the labour market; curricula are too theoretical, practical training of students is weak, and learning on the job is not well organised. The conclusion is that the current post-secondary system needs to be improved so that it better caters for the needs of the labour market and the students.

A study conducted on post-secondary programs in three selected sectors (ICT, tourism and construction) confirms the potential of post-secondary programs and shows that most of the surveyed companies are interested to cooperate with the educational providers in the design, delivery and assessment of post-secondary programs. However, what clearly emerges is that the cooperation until now is minimal (limited to internships) and that there is a series of challenges that needs to be addressed so that post-secondary programs are recognized and the benefits of work-based learning practices become evident to all relevant actors.

Next steps on basis of the study conducted include the following:

Educational institutions may review their post-secondary program design process and learning outcomes, review curricula and come to conclusions about - curriculum development for matching supply and (future) demand; - the delivery of post-secondary programs, which is the core of such programs, and – the feedback loop, a reflection on relevance of skills and competences of graduates and the efficiency of the programs. Work-based learning and collaboration with private sector companies should receive adequate attention.

At national level, employers and government should discuss in relevant bodies and platforms (National Labour Council, National VET Council, Sector Skills Committees, etc.) the relevance of current educational options, and join forces with educational providers.

The private sector is not used yet to be involved in education. The best way to encourage businesses to participate in collaboration, is to show how it works well in other businesses and what benefits for the company and for students are generated.

For Albania it would be of great interest to gradually establish vocational (professional) higher education (i.e., not only post-secondary, but also higher levels, i.e. Professional Bachelor (level - 6) and Professional Master (level - 7)) as a pillar of the higher education system. This has been also declared by the Government in the Strategy for Education 2021-2026.

Based on the experience of other countries with rich traditions in vocational and dual education, not only in Western Europe (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Netherlands, etc.) but also in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia, Albania may prepare its own Law on Dual education at all levels of the education system.

Inclusiveness must be improved, and VET should cater for students with various disabilities and distance to the labour market too. Sensibilization towards inclusivity is very low in Albania, from the education provider and employers alike. Concrete measures to reinforce inclusivity must be developed and implemented by policymakers, starting with education so that students with disabilities are adequately trained and later with employers so that non-discriminatory policies and practices will be in place.

From the observation regarding the mismatch between demand and supply for labour (high youth unemployment on one hand and on the other companies struggling to recruit right future employees), it is concluded that education in general should better align with the demands, not only current but especially future demands, for new employees.

Lifelong learning requires much more attention from employers and employees. National educational and economic policies should highlight the need for lifelong learning – in Albania it is underdeveloped. INSTAT reported in 2017 in its Adult Learning Survey that about 8,2 % of Albania's working people had been involved in informal education or training, but that is unevenly distributed. More insight is needed, and pilot actions may be developed to start stressing the importance of adult participation in learning.

O. Introduction

Post-secondary programs take a significant share of higher education; about 15% of enrolled high school graduates in higher education in Albania, which is comparable to other European countries . Based on the data base of ASCAL (2021) , out of 101 programs about 90% belong to applied sciences. 17 programs are offered in ICT, 14 programs in tourism and 12 programs in the construction field. More than 90% of higher education institutions (HEI) offer post-secondary programs and therefore they are distributed over all major cities of the country (Tirana, Durrës, Shkodra, Elbasan, Korça, Vlora and Gjirokastra). Until recently all post-secondary study programs have been offered by higher education institutions (universities, university colleges, higher vocational colleges). According to the Albanian Law on Vocational Education and Training (2017), such courses can also be offered at the Multifunctional Vocational Training Centres , with 3 programs already being piloted in the academic year 2021 -2022. Post-secondary education is a priority of education in Albania and the tendency is to expand this level of education .

The post-secondary programs and usually the practice-oriented applied programs were also offered by HEIs and VET institutions in West Balkan (WB) countries . With the exception of Kosovo, all other WB countries offer post-secondary programs of 1-2 years (ISCED 5). In addition, HEIs in Serbia and Republic of Northern Macedonia also offer applied bachelor's or vocational bachelor's degree programs (ISCED 6), an experience also found in other countries of former Yugoslavia, namely Croatia and Slovenia. WB is one of the regions with higher unemployment in Europe, especially of graduates immediately after graduation, which is one of the important reasons for the massive outflow of young people from the Balkan countries. The vertical mismatch between educational attainment and employment of graduates is still very high in WB countries, amounting to about 47%, which has to do with the insufficient orientation of education to the needs of the labour market and especially with the very weak practical training of students .

International experience shows that VET usually provides a qualification for an intermediate vocational level, between those requiring an upper secondary vocational qualification and those requiring a bachelor's degree. According to OECD (2014) , nearly two-thirds of overall employment growth in the European Union (EU25) is forecast to be in the “technicians and associate professionals” category – the category most closely linked to this sector.

The objective of this study is to review the current framework and provision of post-secondary education and training in Albania and contribute for its improvement through policy recommendations.

0.1. Context and demand for higher skills

0.1.1. Demographic and social aspects

Albania is still a low-income country by Western standards (GDP per capita nominal EU average USD 34,843). According to the World Bank statistics of 2019 , Albania has a per capita GDP of USD 5,353 (nominal) and, thus, ranks 38th among the 40 countries of Europe. Despite that fact, and the progress that the country has shown during the last decades, unemployment remains one of the most important challenges. Despite the positive development of the last five years, i.e. a decrease in unemployment (INSTAT, Labour Force Survey) , the general unemployment rate for all age groups of the labour force (> 15 years) remains at a higher level of 11.9% (men 11.7%, women 12.1%), with an increase of about 0.5% in 2021 compared to the beginning of 2020 (11.4%), still above the EU average (7%). The unemployment rate of young people (age 15-29) is about twice as high as the general unemployment rate.

This still very high youth unemployment remains one of the most important challenges for the country's development and has to do with the emigration of young people and the demographic development of the country. INSTAT data (2021) show a significant decrease in the share of young people in the age structure of the Albanian population. The National Education Strategy (draft) 2021-2026 foresees a 29,9% decline in the age group under 24 years in 2031 compared to 2019 as the worst-case scenario . This scenario is much more pessimistic for the 18-24 age group, where the decline in 2031 compared to 2019 is 39,2%, which is important for the evolution of enrolments and total number of students in post-secondary and tertiary education in the coming decade. This demographic trend can also be confirmed in the medium term, for the period 2021-26. Across the country, the proportion of age group under 25 years is declining by about 10,7%, with the decline in the prefectures of Diber, Gjirokastra, Kukës, Fier, Berat and Elbasan being twice as high at 18 - 24%. Only in the prefecture of Tirana will the share of this age group increase by 2,03 % in the next five years . This demographic development is of great importance, not only for the education system, but also for various other economic and social sectors throughout the country and especially for the regions/prefectures most affected by ageing.

0.1.2. Economic and labour market context

Agriculture remains the main employment sector in Albania, despite the changes that took place especially in the last decade, namely decline of agriculture and increase mainly of the service sectors, especially tourism and ICT. Labour market trends are usually statistically analysed in three groups, namely the agricultural sector, the non-agricultural sector and the public sector. The share of agriculture on the Albanian GDP counts 18,6% and this sector employs 39% of the workforce . Agriculture remains one of the largest sectors in Albania and accounts for about one-fifth of the gross domestic product. The industrial sector accounts for 20,2% of the country's GDP and employs about 20% of the active population. Trade, transport and hotels takes 18,8 % des GDP. This sector includes also accommodation and food proxied as tourism sector. This study on post-secondary education, will examine the

situation in three sectors: tourism, construction and ITC. These sectors are considered to spearhead the development of Albania's economy.

According to the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development, 2019-2023, and the Economic Impact Report of 2018 of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), along 2017, the tourism sector recorded a direct contribution of 8.5% of the GDP, while including indirect multiplier effects, the total contribution was estimated at nearly 26.2% of the GDP, positioning this sector as one of the main contributors to the development of the national economy. In terms of employment, currently the tourism sector employs about 12% of the total labour force in Albania. Referring to the same report of the World Council on Travel and Tourism¹⁶, investments in this sector accounted for about 7,5% of all investments in the country. According to the NSSTD (2019), compared to other Mediterranean countries the development of tourism in Albania is still far from the potential represented by the country's natural, historical and cultural assets. Infrastructure, accommodation capacities, quality of services, the tourism offer, and product are all factors that have somewhat inhibited the development of tourism in Albania, leaving room for uncontrolled and chaotic development that has actually kept this industry in operation. However, these factors also endanger its sustainability in the long run. In this context, quality of services, planning and management are factors related to human capacities of the tourism sector.

Construction is the other important sector of the Albanian economy, which counts for 10,3 % of the GDP. Currently the construction sector employs about 9 % of the total labour force in Albania. The ICT sector is one of the most recently developed sectors of the Albanian economy, which has experienced a rapid development in the last 15 years. Currently, this sector accounts for only about 3,3% of GDP and employs about 2% of the labour force, with a tendency to increase rapidly. These three sectors are also very relevant for the European economy and their future employment growth average over the period 2020-2030 is estimated to be strong according to Cedefop's 2021 Skills Panorama, ICT at 11,9%, Tourism at 10,5% and Construction at 8,4%.

In Albania, the development of the selected three sectors varies from region to region of the country. The Tirana-Durres region is the primate economic region, and there is an under-utilised development potential in other regions of Albania. This requires not only investment but also skilled human capacity. These regional differences are also an important clue for planning the education of students at all levels of higher education, especially at the "intermediate" or post-secondary vocational education level.

Demographic development is worrisome. Especially the possible further sharp decline in the share of the 15-29 age group in Albania's population is considered as an important factor for the development not only of the selected economic sectors, but and also for the future of vocational and higher education, especially when it comes to insufficiently developed regions of the country, which are also the most affected by youth out-migration and ageing. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed new and major challenges to all economic and social sectors. In this context, the changes especially in the world of work and the new challenges for the digital skills of the workforce should be highlighted, which are of great importance for the education of students in higher vocational education and further tertiary education levels.

Digitalisation has posed new major challenges for the entire education system. Digital skills are necessary for all graduates of post-secondary studies and all tertiary education levels to meet the demands of the professions in all areas. Enhancing digital skills and competences of students of tertiary education including post-secondary levels for the digital transformation, requires beside basic digital skills and competences and digital literacy, also computing education, good knowledge and understanding of data-intensive technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced digital skills. These challenges need to be carefully considered in the curriculum design, module content, teaching competences, learning outcomes and skills of post-secondary programs.

The data for the EU countries shows that in the tourism and construction sectors, a medium level of education is required for 53-57% of employees, while a high level of education is required for about 17%. The picture is different for the ICT sector, where higher educational levels are required for about 65% of employees, a medium level of education for 31% and a low level of education for only 4%. Similar trends are also described in some studies on the labour market in Albania and the Western Balkans. These trends need to be considered very carefully when developing post-secondary programs in Albania.

0.2. Defining post-secondary VET

Since 2005, Albania has formally, i.e. structurally, reformed all study programs and curricula according to the Bologna Process, i.e. post-secondary tertiary study cycle (or short tertiary study cycle) according Bologna process (PS-5th level of The European Qualifications Framework -EQF), 1st university study cycle or Bachelor level (BA-6th level of EQF), 2nd university study cycle or Master level (MA- 7th level of EQF) and 3rd university study cycles Doctoral level (8th level of EQF) Post-secondary education level belongs to the higher vocational education (HVE), which includes beside post-secondary, further tertiary levels, i.e. and professional Bachelor and Master .

In its taxonomy of Higher Vocational Education and Training, the European Commission (2016) , lists the following:

1. Post-secondary programmes outside higher education (EHEA) at ISCED 2011 levels 4 or 5. These qualifications or programmes are often aimed at upper-secondary graduates of initial vocational education and training and general education. as first vocational qualification or an additional vocational qualification.
2. Qualifications acquired based on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (competence tests) which can also, in some cases, be prepared through a programme. This is typically the case of the Master craftsperson qualifications but also other continuous VET qualifications.
3. Various C-VET programmes/qualifications outside the formal system.
4. Short cycle higher education
5. Professional Bachelor and Professional master's degrees
6. Dual studies (apprenticeships or alternance) at Bachelor or Master level (or even at Doctoral level)

Post-secondary education level is defined according to OECD (2014) as “professional education and training” (PET). Many professional and technical jobs require no more than one or two years of career preparation beyond upper secondary level, and in some countries as much as one-quarter of the adult workforce have this type of qualification. Nearly two-thirds of overall employment growth in the European Union (EU25) is forecast to be in the “technicians and associate professionals” category – the category most closely linked to this sector.”

According to the Albanian Qualifications Framework , the post-secondary qualification is defined as follows:

Level 5-2 as Vocational Education:

- Qualification programs of post-secondary education of vocational character
- Non-university study program post-secondary vocational education
Professional certificate.

Level 5-3 as LLL qualification:

- Bridging course (certificate)
- Specialization courses based on professional requirements.

To more clearly depict the vertical permeability of the qualification levels according to the Albanian Qualifications Framework, it would be useful to present the descriptions of the Level 4 and Level 5 of qualifications as defined by AQF (2018).

General (Traditional) Qualifications:

Level 4:

State Matura Diploma, issued at the end of the program of general high school.

Vocational Education:

Level 4:

1. State Matura Diploma, issued at end of program for Vocational Education
2. Professional certificate issued at end of 4-year study program for middle-level technician or manager
3. Professional certificate issued at end of 1-year study program for middle-level technician or manager
4. Professional certificate issued at end of 2-year study program for middle-level technician or manager
5. Professional certificate issued at end of craft program.

Level 5:

- Qualification programs of post-secondary education of vocational character
- Non-university study program post-secondary vocational education
Professional certificate

LLL Qualification:

Level 4:

Bridging course 4 Vocational Training Course Specialization courses based on professional requirements.

Level 5:

- Bridging course (certificate).
- Specialization courses based on professional requirements.

In order to differentiate among post-secondary programs provided by Vocational Education Training Schools and Centres and programs provided by Higher Education Institutions, the terminology used herein forth will be post-secondary tertiary and post-secondary non-tertiary programmes.

While all the above represent relevant pathways for learners, in Albania two categories (1. post-secondary programs outside higher education and 4. short cycle higher education) have been subject to more intentional and articulated attempts from the regulatory framework and providers alike. Therefore, while being aware of the broad scope of Higher Vocational Education and Training, this study will narrow down the focus to post-secondary programs. These types of qualifications are often defined as “technician and associate professional”.

0.3. Scope and objectives of the study

Albania started the transition toward an open market economy in early 1990's, through intensive multi-dimensional structural reform programs. As part of the reform agenda, labour market transition from a guaranteed full-employment model to a competitive free market employment, witnessed challenges especially in the shift of labor force from low productivity sectors towards more productive ones. Despite continuous interventions in economic and labor market policies, unemployment remains a major challenge, especially youth unemployment. From findings of Kovtun et al. in 2014 it appears that informal employment and emigration keep on playing an important role in WB economies. The mismatch among the outcomes from the universities and the needs of the market is assessed to extend the transfer period from fresh university graduate to employee in the labor market. Currently, universities design programs that are insufficiently aligned with the needs of the labor market.

Responding to the national priorities and objectives of the National Employment and Skills Strategy, Skills Development for Employment (SD4E) programme, financed by the Swiss Government and implemented by UNDP, has the ambition to make a systemic contribution where the Albanian VET system and Employment Service supply the labour market with a skilled workforce that contributes to sustainable and inclusive economic development of the country. Therefore, UNDP initiated a study with the objective to analyse needs and scope for extending the offer of vocational education and training to post-secondary levels (including VET at tertiary level), as well as to identify the potential for increased collaboration between education and training institutions at tertiary level and the private sector.

The new VET law (15/2017) foresees an active contribution from the private sector, be it in the preparation and design of the programmes but also with regards to their delivery (via work-based learning (WBL) schemes). Against this backdrop, the role of the private sector thus far has been subpar. This, together with the limited pathways and opportunities for the various categories (upper secondary VET graduates, general high school graduates and adults), has resulted in an underdeveloped VET offer at post-secondary level, although the need therefore is emphasized by several studies and some legal framework arrangements have been undertaken over the years. Policy recommendations on how to improve the relevance of the professional education and training programs for the labour market in terms of design, viability and delivery are very much needed. These recommendations are urgent considering the fact that there is already a significant number of students in post-secondary professional programs delivered by Higher Education Institutions in Albania and recently established programs in VET schools. Moreover, there is a growing awareness that a higher level of skills is required in the market by the private sector, which is also acknowledged by policymaking institutions.

0.4. Methodology

As mentioned above, post-secondary programs can be provided by both Vocational Education Schools and Centres and Higher Education Institutions. Their delivery by the former is still very recent (no graduates yet), therefore the data are limited making the analysis difficult and eventual results premature and questionable. On the other hand, universities have utilized the arrangements of the Law on Higher Education (Law 80/2015) to provide post-secondary vocational programmes. Respectively, some 3,000 students were enrolled in post-secondary vocational education programmes at universities in the academic year 2019-2020, compared to a total of 19,000 students enrolled in undergraduate programs. Therefore, this study focuses on the analysis of post-secondary tertiary programs.

The initial stage of the study consisted of desk research, i.e., making use of bibliographic data (legal framework in Albania, former studies of the VET system in Albania, international best practices). The second stage relied on inputs from the relevant stakeholders of post-secondary education and training programs (providers, businesses and policymakers). The methodology of the study entailed triangulation of data among various resources by adopting a mixed methodology – the quantitative phase (surveys with businesses of the three selected sectors and with post-secondary program providers) and the qualitative phase (semi-structured interviews and a roundtable with the focus group).

The business survey included, after general data, questions about assessment of skills match among demand and supply in the labour market of their sector, current engagement in post-secondary programs, incentives needed, obstacles that companies face and a final space for open comments / suggestions. A second questionnaire with a similar set of question categories was shared with providers of post-secondary professional programs. Both questionnaires were prepared in English and later translated to Albanian to ease understanding and increase the response rate. For the business survey, a non-probabilistic snowball or chain referral sampling technique was used. The questionnaires were administered on-line and was undertaken by 107 companies and 12 providers in September / Nove 2021. Semi-structured interviews (conducted in person or via phone) followed with respondents who had left their personal data in the business survey and indicated that they were interested in a follow-up discussion.

The findings of the survey were shared in a Roundtable meeting with a focus group of 40+ attendees, focusing on

- pathways for graduates of upper secondary program to obtain technical skills at higher levels of specialization.
- pathways for graduates of general education.
- adults already in the labour market in need of reskilling and upskilling.

All inputs have been analysed vis-à-vis the dimensions considered by OECD with regard to policy issues, namely:

1. responsiveness to labour market needs,
2. inclusion,

3. access,
4. career guidance,
5. governance,
6. teaching quality,
7. integration with workplace learning,
8. articulation with other sectors of education
9. assessment.

A limitation of the present study is the fact the post-secondary VET as regulated by Law 15/2017 (VET Law) is not a full-fledged offer yet in Vocational Education Schools and Centres, compared to that at higher education institutions, limiting the survey on the provision only to the latter.

The number of the companies surveyed for the three sectors (n=107) is not statistically representative but provides a good sample that allows to identify patterns and attitudes of businesses towards the present VET system in Albania. It is unknown to what extent COVID-19 has affected the perceptions of businesses. The three selected sectors have been seriously affected; the tourism sector has been hit especially hard and might be not so optimistic at the moment. On the other hand, the ICT sector has been experiencing a boost. The pandemic has placed a very strong emphasis on the need for digital literacy and digital skills not only for the ones about to enter the workforce but also for the currently employed, which might slightly distort the responses as opposed to a 'business as usual' situation.

1. International Practices in the provision of Post-Secondary and Higher VET

Considering that the Post-Secondary Education and Training in Albania is still nascent, the intention of this summary of International Practices is twofold:

1. To identify positive features of these national systems that may be relevant and replicated in the Albanian context
2. To identify shortcomings that can be avoided while the post-secondary education and training system in Albania is still in its initial steps

Both positive features and limitations witnessed thus far, come out well in the case of Dutch programs, where post-secondary vocational education (corresponding to EQF level 5) is called Associate Degree (AD) programs, offered by Hogescholen (HBO, comparable to Fachhochschulen in German). First an overview of the educational system is given below, and then AD is discussed.

1.1. VET in Netherlands – Associate Degrees

The Associate Degree (AD) was legally introduced as part of the HBO (hoger beroepsonderwijs – higher vocational education) program structure in 2007. Associate degrees (AD) are a two-year part time educational program, resulting in a diploma. With this diploma, a person can enter year 3 of a 4-year bachelor's program. Associate Degrees are organized mostly by Dutch Hogescholen, but also private providers, like NCOI (www.ncoi.nl) are among the suppliers.

The associate degree program has been offered independently since 2018. The program is mainly designed to prepare students for the labour market in a shorter space of time. Admission requirement is HAVO (Hoger Algemeen Voortgezet Onderwijs – general secondary education) diploma or MBO (Middelbaar Beroeps Onderwijs – secondary vocational education) diploma (qualification level 4). It is 120 ECTS. Graduates will have obtained a level (EQF level 5) somewhere between MBO-4 and HBO. An Associate degree program is for students who finished secondary schools (MBO, HAVO) and also for employees who want to pick up studies and opt for part-time courses with a combination of working and learning. Thereby they obtain a diploma and strengthen their position in the labour market. Employers usually support their employees to formalize their skills and obtain a diploma.

Key points for the AD are:

1. After two years students have a diploma for professional practice. Young students are immediately employable because during the studies they have learned how things work in the workplace. They have knowledge, experience, and a higher professional education diploma.
2. Associate degrees are developed with companies and institutions from the field. Students learn based on practical issues, what is needed to be able to

- become a valuable professional. Teachers have practical experience themselves.
- Associate degree diploma give access to a related bachelor's degree. Students then start in year 3, so with two more years of studying the student can obtain your bachelor's degree.

In total, the public sector funded HBO in their offer of 226 programs, and the private sector HBO's offered 257 programs.

Due to a shortage of skilled personnel in Holland, AD degrees are typically designed for sectors with a high demand for employees (but not always). They are routes for students from MBO to continue into a practice-focused pathway. Students for the dual route, are often better motivated. Typically, they are not satisfied with their diploma, want to develop in their work and in their career, and know that they need diplomas. While the initiatives come from individuals, companies are generally involved and support the student (the costs of education, negotiating about salary compensation for time spent at school, accommodating students' learning tasks, etc.). A benefit for the individual is that achieving an AD diploma tells something about a person; future employers see that an applicant is interested to grow and learn.

A 2019 evaluation of the AD system of education showed a number of critical topics:

- The AD programs have started in 2006, but are still relatively unknown among employers and their HR departments.
- The offer of AD programs is dominated by 4 Hogescholen. The experience is that other Hogescholen, do not give high priority to AD development. This situation is now changing.
- The percentage of part-time (dual) is still modest in the figure below (dark blue = full time, light blue = part-time and orange = dual). The figure (figure 1) below refers to number of 1st year AD students.

Number of first-year AD students by education type (2006-2017)

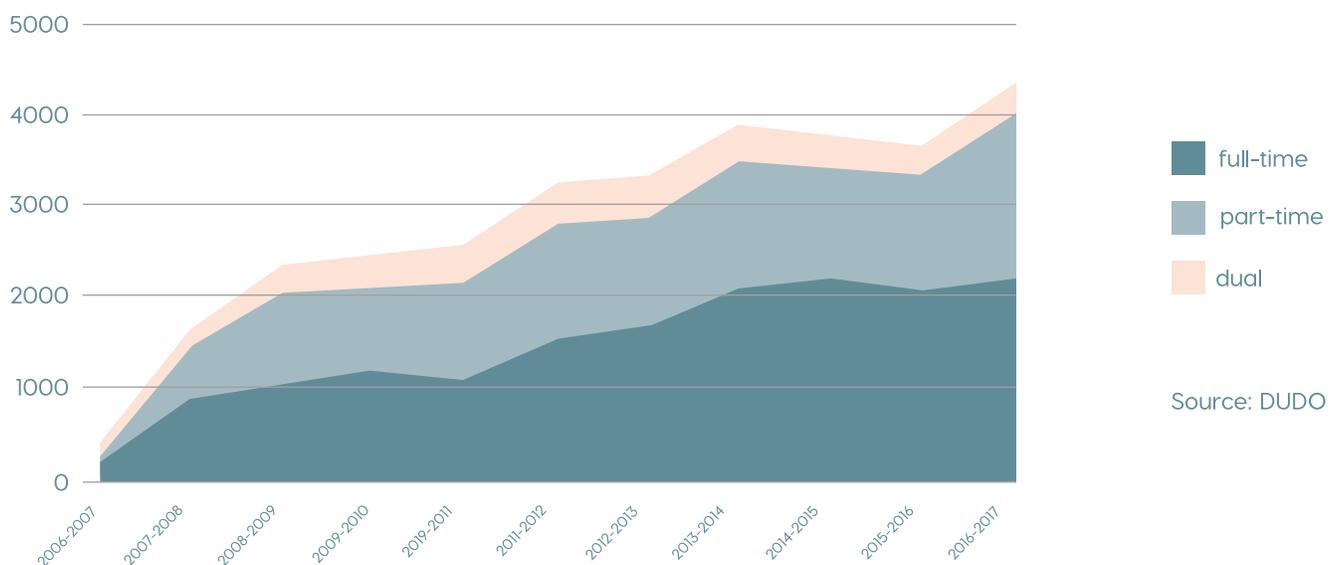


Figure 1 – Share of dual programs among Associate Degrees in the Netherlands

- In 2018-2019 the AD programs grew with 50-100%, since more HBO's and private institutions started to develop these educational offerings.
- Many full-time students do not complete their AD program (in fact, the majority). Part-time and dual students complete the program more often. This is because of students' motivation and maturity and a social and learning structure offered by the company.

The total number of AD students is still modest, compared to regular HBO students. This has various reasons, next to the relative unknown character as mentioned. AD courses are relatively often chosen by people who already have a job and want to re-train (new skills, obtain a diploma). It also appears that the proportion of women following an Associate Degree program has systematically increased in recent years; now nearly two-thirds of students in a full-time program are women. One reason for this is the high demand of jobs in the health care sector.

Interesting is that the average age of students in the private sector, is way higher than in public educational institutes. This is also related to the collaboration with companies. Collaboration of companies with educational programs varied considerably. In some cases, companies have no influence on the offer. In private sector educational institutions, the relationship between companies and education is better than in public sector organisation, there is another more business-minded culture, students are in a dual learning route, and companies contribute to the students' learning. Another factor is that private institutions, contract teaching staff in a part-time way and select professionals who work in practice and like to share their knowledge with younger people.

To conclude; the Netherlands is often seen as a good practice for AD education, but the intake is still modest, the completion numbers are a difficulty, and the degrees are not well known among employers. These points are now being taken up by the educational suppliers.

1.2. VET in Switzerland

There are many reasons why Switzerland can be considered a best practice when it comes to Vocational Education and Training, post-secondary programs included, but one of the most indicative is the high share of pupils that choose VET over general education (70% / 30%). This reflects the very positive image of the system as a testament to its effectiveness.

Hoeckel, K., S. Field and W.N. Grubb (2009) in their “A learning for jobs review” list a series of factors that contribute to the well-functioning Swiss VET system, among which:

- strong involvement from the companies (the programs are very employer driven and in-company learning (the Swiss term for work-based learning) is very well integrated with the school-based education)
- the system is well resourced (in terms of human resources – trained teachers, examiners, etc as well as in terms of equipment)
- it has a well-structured quality control and career counselling,
- but more importantly it has a very good permeability, granting many options to VET graduates with a wide range of pathways to tertiary VET programs and academic programs alike (even if additional criteria might apply), avoiding dead-ends.

Being a confederate, the challenge remains however to ensure seamless integration among the VET and PET programs between the different cantons (which have a lot of independence and competences), but also to guarantee international comparability. With this regard, EU’s apprenticeship toolbox (2021) states that a national qualification framework for VPET was established in 2014 by the Federal Council of Switzerland, covering 730 formal VET and PE qualifications.

Reportedly, in Switzerland, the cooperation among companies and education institutions dates back a century ago, so it might be understandable why there are few countries, even within OECD, that can compare to the Swiss case. However, some conceptual coordinates might serve as guiding principles for other countries as well, with the need for a real and proper dual system (work-based and school-based learning) at its core, companioned with additional measures such as quality control, career counselling and more importantly horizontal and vertical access throughout the system.

1.3. VET system in Austria

Austria's VET system is by many accounts also a best practice, considering the large and growing number of students in VET programs and Universities of Applied Sciences (Fachhochschulen). In OECD's Reviews of Vocational Education and Training – Key messages and Country Reports, there are two reports on the VET system in Austria, "A learning for Jobs Review" by K. Hoeckl and "A skills beyond school review" by P. Musset .

While they tend to converge on some important positive features of the Austrian system, especially the role of the social partners, there are also some contradictory findings. Hoeckl reports that there is a variety of pathways that connects VET to tertiary education - mainly the BRP (Berufsreifeprüfung - professional baccalaureate). This is however questioned in the Musset review, where two substantial challenges are noted.

- while access to tertiary education is formally granted even to students with no Matura qualification (apprentices), it is little used in practice. This observation is backed up by Tritscher-Archan et al (2015) for the Apprenticeship Toolbox. *"At Fachhochschulen (FH, university of applied science) apprenticeship graduates also have access without the HE entrance examination since they have a VET qualification. However, only about 6% of the students at these universities have completed a BRP."*
- VET graduates, by and large, choose universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) for their tertiary education. However, they face difficulties to receive full recognition of their VET qualification.

There is also a slight discrepancy regarding the assessment of the work-based learning model, being praised as very effective in one review and in the other, while recognized as wide-spread and well-structured, it is also pointed out that it is not mandatory and not embedded in the quality standards.

Another challenge identified is the need to improve career counselling and broaden the range of students that have access to adequate career counselling. *"Even though there are around 200 apprenticeships, young people tend to select only a certain range of apprentices. Vocational guidance and counselling should counteract this trend."*

However, what stands out is intense involvement of the social partners in Austria's VET system. In a similar fashion to the Swiss case, they are heavily involved in almost every aspect of the vocational education and training, not only in the design, delivery and assessment of the programs, but also in anticipating future needs and taking the initiative and bringing forth proposals to establish new VET programs.

2. Regulatory Framework Analysis

2.1. Governance and institutional framework

As post-secondary VET programs are offered by higher education institutions and VET institutions, their governance is regulated by several laws and bylaws such as the Higher Education Law (2015), the Vocational Education and Training Law (2017), and the AQF Law (2010, amended in 2018), and respective secondary legislation of all three laws. According to the legal framework, the governance of VET, as that of the education system in general, is mainly in the hands of the government, the national agencies, HEI, and the public VET providers. There are two ministries responsible for post-secondary Vocational Education and Training. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) is responsible for the higher education system and the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE) is responsible for the VET system.

MoES is mainly responsible for:

- Formulating national policies for general education, higher education and research;
- Developing the legal framework and monitoring its implementation;
- Adopting national post-secondary qualifications and opening and closing higher education institutions and post-secondary tertiary programs in higher education institutions;

Under the MoES are the following agencies/institutions:

1. Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in HE / ASCAL (Quality Assurance and Accreditation);
2. Centre of Education Services /QSHA (student enrolment);
3. Agency of Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education/ ASCAP (quality assurance in general education);
4. Agency of Higher Education Financing (responsible for financing public higher education institutions and degree programs);
5. Agency of Scientific Research and Innovation (agency responsible for research and innovation); no specific function related to post-secondary VET);
6. Albanian Academic Network -U-Albania (application and university placement services, etc.).

Advisory bodies are attached to MoES, namely the National Councils for Higher Education and Research and the National Council for Pre-University Education.

MFE performs the same tasks in cooperation with subordinate agencies/institutions for VET-5 programs offered by VET schools and the MFCs.

As per the Law 15 / 201737, MFE has the following competencies:

- a) drafts policies in the field of VET, as well as monitors their implementation;
- b) drafts and proposes the legal framework in the field of VET;
- c) monitors and guarantees the quality of the VET system;
- d) provides the necessary human, financial and logistic resources for the operation of VET;

- e) cooperates with social partners in the field of VET;
- f) coordinates the cooperation with other central institutions, which are responsible for specific aspects of VET;
- g) approves the opening, reorganization and closure of public VET providers, according to criteria and procedures determined by a decision of the Council of Ministers;
- h) cooperates with the National Business Centre in the process of licensing private VET providers;
- i) approves the opening and closing of programs, based on national qualifications, provided by public VET providers;
- j) approves the procedures for the recognition of previous knowledge;
- k) coordinates local and international partners that operate and contribute in the field of VET;
- l) approves the basic documents of national professional qualifications;
- m) determines the procedures for the recognition of learning and professional qualifications of levels 2 to level 5 of the Albanian Qualifications Framework, including those obtained abroad;
- n) determines the procedures for the recognition of professional qualifications for regulated professions, according to the directives of the European Union.

MFE works closely with other institutions at the central level, such as the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MoESY) and its subordinate institutions (Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education and the Centre for Educational Services), on issues related to vocational education, inclusive post-secondary VET, such as the recruitment and continuous professional development of teachers of general education subjects or the organization of Matura examinations for students of secondary vocational education.

Under the MFE, there are two national agencies that play a key role in the development, management, monitoring, and quality assurance of vocational education and training: the National Agency for Vocational Education, Training and Qualifications (NAVETQ) and the National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES). NAVETQ is entrusted by law to create a unified national system of vocational qualifications based on the AQF that supports the adaptation of training programs to the needs of the labour market. To this end, NAVETQ is responsible for developing and revising the National Classification of Occupations, occupational standards, assessment standards and national framework curricula for AQF levels 2 to 5, accrediting vocational training providers and organizing continuous professional development, whilst NAES is in charge of maintaining a register of final certificates and supplements of certificates issued by VET providers and tracking VET graduates.

2.2. Legal Framework

Post-Secondary Vocational programs are offered in Albania as Level 5 of AQF and EQF by both higher education institutions (HEI) and vocational high schools/ Multifunctional Vocational and Training Centres (MFC) (VET providers. The AQF level (level 5) in Albania is mainly regulated by three laws and consequent by-laws (governmental decisions and ministerial decrees), namely:

1. The Law on Higher Education No. 80/2015 for the VET-5 study programs offered by HEI; (post-secondary part of tertiary education as defined earlier)
2. The Law on Vocational Education and Training No. 15/2017 for VET-5 programs offered by vocational colleges and MFC (VET-system). (post-secondary non-tertiary);
3. The Law on Albanian Qualification Framework (AQF), that structures qualifications belonging to Level 5 (similar to the European Qualifications Framework - EQF), offered by both types of institutions, i.e. HEI, and VET providers.

There are a number of government decisions and ministerial decrees (by-laws) that derive from the three laws mentioned above and regulate various aspects of post-secondary programs. These by-laws are also included in the analysis of the current legal framework for VET in Albania.

a) Inclusion and access to post-secondary programs.

The Albanian Law on Higher Education (80/2015) defines vocational higher education as “higher professional education”. According to this law, all types of higher education institutions (HEI) may offer vocational higher education study programs. Moreover, according to this law, the HEI type of Higher Vocational “Colleges” (Kolegji Profesional i Lartë), may only offer two-years vocational study programs (post-secondary or “professional education and training”). Further, this Law stipulates Professional master’s study program (PM) with main characteristics vs. scientific master’s degrees (MSc). Article 81 of the Law on HE stipulates that advanced professional training courses in the form of Life-Long Learning (LLL) and can be offered by all types of HEI. These courses conclude with certificates of vocational education.

The Law on HE defines only one type of Bachelor as a 1st level or cycle of university degree according Bologna Standards, with at least 180 ECTS and 3 years or 6 semesters. The degree is defined only as “Bachelor”, i.e., not as “Bachelor of Science” or “Bachelor of Arts” or “Professional Bachelor”, as it is the case in the other countries of Europe and the USA.

The Vocational Education and Training Law (15/2017) stipulates that non-tertiary post-secondary VET can be offered by multifunctional vocational education and training centres (MFC), but does not describe any other specific provisions regarding this level of education. Furthermore, this law states that the National Agency of Vocational Education, Training & Qualifications (NAVETQ) is responsible for the development of qualifications standards, assessment standards for vocational qualifications at level 5 and corresponding frame curricula of non-tertiary post-secondary VET programs that can be offered by VET providers (vocational schools, multifunctional VET centres).

The offer of non-tertiary post-secondary programs by VET providers has already started but only three such programs are currently being delivered and have yet to produce the first graduates. Therefore, it is not yet possible to make an analysis about it. There is only the legal framework, which is already in use. Therefore, our analysis in this report is mainly based on the implemented and ongoing post-secondary programs (offered by the HEIs).

The state Matura diploma, obtained at the end of the program of the general High secondary school (Gymnasium) and the vocational high school (VET colleges) is the main prerequisite for enrolment in the VET programs offered by the HEI as well as VET system. From this point of view, the MATURA requirement for enrolment in post-secondary programs, at least for post-secondary non-tertiary, could be considered a rather high requirement compared to other countries . Education systems in other countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Serbia) do not require a Matura diploma as a prerequisite for post-secondary VET. This means that only high school graduates and graduates of vocational high schools with a State Matura and or Vocational State Matura Diploma have access to this level, which practically means a serious restriction for the access of other graduates of Albanian VET high schools of level who only obtained the Final School Examination (Vocational Qualification Certificate, AQF Level 4)⁴ to vocational qualifications as post-secondary VET.

Recommendation: *Based on the experiences of other countries related to the admission requirements to post-secondary VET 5, it is advised to re-consider whether graduates of Upper secondary VET should be guaranteed access to non-tertiary post-secondary VET, which is offered at VET colleges and MFC, only with a school final exam (theoretical and practical). For this purpose, in addition to the school final exam, other criteria could be adapted with regard to the vocational subjects and also the practical skills, and even an entrance examination. This could possibly also reduce the pressure of vocational students to necessarily take the Vocational State Matura. This implies that the admission procedures for post-secondary non tertiary programs could be better defined and more elaborated in terms of criteria but also selection process.*

On the other hand, the application for higher education study programs and the allocation of study places is centrally organized in Albania and runs through a national agency, the Albanian Academic Network. That is, high school graduates apply and are then ranked according to aggregate average grades (i.e., the performance of the three years of high school and high school graduation exams are added together on a weighted basis). Based on the number of available study places (quotas), applicants are admitted according to the ranking list. Each year the Albanian government sets a minimum average score for admission to bachelor's studies (level 6 of the EQF) (this year, for example, >6.5). That means that all high school graduates who have a grade point average <6.5 are only allowed to apply for a post-secondary academic program. This regulation can harm the image of post-secondary, as it gives the impression that this level would only be for not-so-good high school graduates, which is not the case.

As described above, the admission of applicants to post-secondary tertiary programs requires only the state university entrance qualification. If the number of applicants is significantly higher than the number of study places, the VET provider may also introduce an aptitude

test for VET-5 study applicants (ministerial decree- by-law, 2021)

Recommendation: *Such centralized and rigid admission process obstructs the accessibility for different target groups, especially adults. Life-long learning and catering for the demand from the current labour force to re-skill or upskill, can have a significant impact in bridging skills gaps. Additionally, a rigid offer hampers the system's ability to be adaptable and proactive about the market needs, therefore the regulatory framework should revise the current provisions on the admission procedures to tertiary post-secondary programmes or short-cycle higher education programmes aiming to ease the access for the different eligible categories of prospective students.*

b) Responsiveness to labour market needs

Responsiveness of post-secondary VET programs to the needs of the labour market can be assessed by analysing the methodology of designing, developing, validating, and adopting these programmes (development of qualifications standards, assessment standards and curricula, as well as official approval procedures). Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) 41/2018 (amended by DCM 879/2019), based on the Higher Education Act (80/2015), establishes criteria (or elements) for the structure and standards of the study programs (post-secondary academic programs included).

In practice, higher education institutions develop post-secondary programs based on the law and the aforementioned decision after conducting a labour market analysis. The higher education institution's application to start delivering the program is first reviewed on the basis of the labour market analysis. Only then, the assessment by independent experts on the fulfilment of other academic criteria provided in the above-mentioned decision begins. So far, there are no bodies or authorities/committees in Albania that provide labour market analysis for different sectors of higher education. It was only two years ago that the Sector Skills Committees (SSC) were approved. Therefore, higher education institutions and other providers seek and use labour market analyses previously prepared by research institutions. It is expected that now that the SSCs are in place, their work's outcome informs not just VET offer but also the entire higher education offer as such – post-secondary included.

At the level of providing institutions, a VET provider that aims to offer a new programme, upper secondary or post-secondary has to conduct a labour market analysis as well. In collaboration with its board and local community, the VET provider submits this request to the Ministry of Finance and Economy, which then decides on the approval of the new programme based on the evaluation by both executive Agencies, the National Agency for Employment and Skills and the National Agency for VET and Qualifications.

c) Private sector engagement and integration of workplace learning in post-secondary VET programs.

The Law on Vocational Education and Training (2017)² and from this law deriving by-laws, provides for the participation of the private sector or the so called Social Partners (WLP) at various levels of the vocational education and training system to provide their input in the development of the legal framework and policy of vocational education and training, in the development of study programs and curricula, in the management and financing of VET

providers, and especially in the implementation of practical training in the company. Private sector representatives (organizations, councils, unions, etc.) are partners in the National Council for Vocational Education and Training (NCVET), Sector Skills Committees (SSC), and other commissions/committees that operate at NAVETQ and NAES.

In addition, the private sector is also directly involved in the management and administration of VET providers, with a private sector representative chairing the VET provider's management board (as per the Minister's Instruction 28 /2018). This practice is currently adopted by all public VET providers. The private sector representatives not only chair the board, but these individuals are the respective heads of their industry associations, hence are mandated to represent not just one company but the entire industry.

VET high schools in Albania mainly offer their practical training in the form of school-based education. The provision of Work-based learning is still very limited in the Albanian vocational education system⁶. In the last two to three years, with the help of Swiss VET programs , a model of dual education has been developed at five vocational high schools in Albania, which could be a good example for the entire vocational education system in the country.

According to the Regulation on the Implementation of in-company training in VET system , the WLP are involved not only in the implementation of practical training, but also in the organization and implementation of the practical examination of students.

The VET Law (15/2017) regulates the practical training in the vocational high schools and multifunctional VET centres. Moreover, Article 22 of this law stipulates Dual training (in Albanian: "Forma e dyfisht" e Arsimit dhe Formimit profesional") and the contract between the trainees and the company refers to the provisions of the Albanian Labour Code.

A recent development is the new Law "Employment Promotion Act" (15/2019), which:

- a) Article 3, item 4 identifies all young people under 29 as disadvantaged jobseekers in the labour market.
- b) Recognizes vocational training as part/form of active employment programs (Art. 6)
- c) Article 11, items 2, describes the financial support in the form of grants in a certain amount for the unemployed people for all forms of employment support, including dual training, in addition to training, equipment of the training place, professional practice, transportation costs to the workplace. It would be quite possible to include VET-5 and other vocational higher education students in this item in addition to the unemployed people.
- d) Article 18, item 3, provides as follows: Employers may apply to regional labour authorities for financial assistance under employment assistance programs. If the category "students" is added to Article 11, employers who offer internships to students can also benefit.
- e) Article 20 of this law also regulates very precisely the number of training places. Companies with up to 25 employees can offer one training or internship place, over 25 - 2 and so on. However, companies that do not offer training places for disabled workers must pay a minimum wage/month into the Social Fund for Employment for each disabled worker that the company could have potentially employed.
- f) Art. 22 describes the Social Fund for Employment and the purposes of using this fund. If the practical training of students in dual study programs were included in Art. 11 of this law,

it would be possible to support the practical training of students through the Social Fund!

On the basis of this law, the Decision of the Council of Ministers 17/2020 on the “On procedures, criteria and rules for the implementation of employment promotion programs through employment, on the job training and professional practices” was approved. Chapter III, Article 3, of the Decision regulates “professional internships” with quite good benefits. However, these consider only graduates, i.e. after graduation, who have not been employed for up to 2 years after graduation. It would be quite possible to amend this government decision in order to include internships for students during their studies.

A much more institutionalized and stronger involvement of the private sector in all aspects of vocational education is foreseen in the Law on Craftsmanship (2016) , where craft organizations play a similar role as in other countries with a good tradition, such as Germany. The short period of implementation of this law and its regulations does not make it possible to gain sufficient experience in vocational education in the crafts sector.

In-company training for the Crafts in Albania is quite well regulated by this Law and could also be used as a model for developing the framework for dual training in the other professions. Based on this, as well as on the experience of other countries, projects on dual education in the vocational secondary education system are already underway in Albania (Posthumus, 2020).

While a good legal framework for the participation of WLP in VET, including post-secondary programs offered by VET institutions (VET high schools and MFCs), already exists, there is no specific regulation for this aspect in the legal framework of higher education in Albania. This means that for the development of higher education post-secondary programs and all related aspects, it depends on the HEI to what extent the WLPs are included.

Practical training in the curricula of post-secondary programs offered by HEI, takes a very limited part of the total study workload in ECTS, which does not exceed in average 10 percent of ECTS (to be discussed further in the next chapter of this report). HEI work with WLP and has MoU’s with them for practical training of students. The experience of contracts between apprentice student and company for practical training in post-secondary academic programs does not exist yet in Albania. A limited experience exists in the framework of a pilot project of a dual bachelor (50% of the studies through in-company training) at the public University of Durres with the support of GIZ Germany. This project was implemented in the period 2008-2013 and continue only in three study programs (Bank Management, Tourism management and SME Management) and with a very limited number of students. This experience was adapted in the last year by a private HEI, namely New York University Tirana in cooperation with BKT (National Commercial Bank), in which a dual bachelor programs with about 2 semester operational training out of 6 semester total study time in the field of Applied Banking and Finance was applied.

Recommendation – Referring to the regulation and legal provision of non-tertiary post-secondary programs for the inclusion and representation of the Social Partners in the governance and management of the school / program (and the case studies mentioned

above), the higher education post-secondary academic should also engage the business sector in a meaningful way in all aspects of the program: design – delivery – assessment – revision. This would help build a systemic and effective feedback loop from the market that will bring the program's outcome closer to the market's needs.

d) Quality of teaching

OECD Report (2014) on post-secondary education identifies three key elements of quality of post-secondary education.

- i) *The great benefits of work-based learning need to be realised systematically in post-secondary programs.* All professional education and training programs should involve some work-based learning as a condition of receiving government funding.

The work-based learning should be systematic, quality assured and credit-bearing. As described in the previous subsections, work-based learning is found only to a very limited extent in the implementation of post-secondary academic programs in Albania, while the usual form of practical training in these programs is that of school-based learning. Therefore, this OECD recommendation is a big challenge for the quality of VET. It is expected that post-secondary non-academic programs will have better opportunities for the implementation of in-service learning, as VET providers, i.e., VET schools and MFCs, have more experience with in-service learning compared to HEIs. According to the ETF Report on Continuing Professional Development for Vocational Teachers and Principals in Albania (Rama, 2020) , around 38% of the teachers declare that most of their students have work placements lasting at least 10% of the duration of their entire program, 16% that most of their students spend less than 10% of their time in the workplace, and 46% of teachers that only some of their students have work placements.

- ii) *Vocational teachers need both teaching skills and up-to-date industry knowledge and experience.* Ensure that the workforce in professional training institutions benefit from a strong blend of pedagogical skills, industry experience and academic knowledge. Adapt qualification requirements to that end.

The development of human resources in the VET system has recently been examined in two comprehensive studies by the European Training Foundation (ETF) (Rama, 2020) and the UNDP (Hilpert, 2020). The conclusions of these studies regarding increasing human capacity in the VET system also apply to increasing the quality of post-secondary programs offered by VET schools and the MFC. ETF identified professional development of teachers as a key driver for the improvement of VET systems across all regions, for two reasons. Firstly, teachers and trainers are the most important input in the VET system, and secondly, they are critical to the successful implementation of other reforms, such as changes in organisations and curricula, and the development of work-based learning, technology, and pedagogy. According to ETF (2020) a legislative and strategic framework for teacher continuous professional development (CPD) is in place in Albania. A national action plan on teachers' and trainers' training should be prepared, but it will require commitment of the financial resources needed for implementation of training and other CPD programs. The new VET law assigns the coordination of VET teacher training to NAVETQ, which will

require additional human and financial resources to fulfil its new responsibilities. Funding for teacher training remains limited and is not enough to satisfy the needs. The introduction of comprehensive in-service teacher training and assessment, including peer mentoring programs and instruments to track teacher effectiveness, remains a challenge.

On the increase of human teacher capacities in the Albanian VET system, Hilpert (2020) recommended as follows:

- Generalise technical and pedagogical upgrading measures for teacher competences (piloted scheme on basic didactics in VET);
- Consult with the regional business community about possibilities for an induction program for VET teachers in companies (intensive visits, short internships, dedicated further training courses in specific and advanced technical areas). Government can provide funding through social fund-type subsidies allocated by the European Union;
- Envisage the possibility of teachers gaining a Master-level diploma through part-time studies or on sabbatical. This possibility should also be given to professional technicians and engineers entering the teaching profession (to add a pedagogic–didactic certificate or diploma).

Nevertheless, there is no specific study to date that specifically addresses the question of the extent to which the human teaching capacities of the VET system enable the VET institutions to offer high-quality post-secondary non-academic programs.

As described above, post-secondary programs in Albania have so far been offered almost exclusively by HEIs. According to the Law on Higher Education and relevant by-laws (in particular DCM 41/2018), academic capacity is also assessed when HEIs apply for new post-secondary programs. However, this assessment of academic capacities for a post-secondary study program is the same as for bachelor’s and master’s programs, i.e., purely academic, based on academic and scientific degrees and qualifications, scientific publications, etc. There is no evaluation of practical application skills, professional experience, and other skills of faculty members that relate to the application of the relevant profession in practice. As an example, the appointment experience of professors and lecturers at universities of applied sciences and vocational academies in Germany is mentioned here.

An important criterion for this, in addition to the scientific qualifications of the applicants, is the experience in the practice of the profession (3 - 5 years). Another criterion with regard to the teaching / training staff is to differentiate among the staff involved in the post-secondary programs to those in the secondary programs be it in terms of qualifications (non-necessarily academic) and the remuneration.

This need was confirmed by the roundtable discussion as well as the interviews with the providers, that pointed out the challenges they face to hire high quality professionals to deliver education and training in post-secondary programs. The public providers are not able to provide a lucrative remuneration for these professionals and this makes it difficult for them to keep them engaged.

Recommendation: *The remuneration of the instructors engaged in non-tertiary post-secondary programs should be comparable to the rate applied for the academic staff*

engaged when such programs are delivered by the Higher Education Institutions. A more qualified staff is imperative for post-secondary programs to be able to provide an added value to upper secondary VET graduates and proper compensation is indispensable with this regard.

- iii) Basic skills are critical both for labour market success and to support further learning. Professional education and training programs should ensure adequate literacy and numeracy skills among their students alongside occupation-specific competencies. This means assessing basic skills at the outset of programs, addressing weaknesses, and integrating basic skills development into professional programs.

The curricula of post-secondary programs offered by Higher Education Institutions in Albania consist in 120 ECTS with a duration of 2 years. They are clearly theoretically oriented especially in the first year of study. This includes basic theoretical subjects, which account for at least 25% of the total workload calculated in ECTS, depending on the field of study. Such a curriculum structure, on one hand, ensures a solid adequate literacy and numeracy education, that can ease the vertical permeability in the system, in the meaning that students have the possibility to study in the higher levels of higher studies such as professional bachelor and master. On the other hand, this practice does not ensure optimal outcomes when it comes to the intended practical skills of the graduates. The duration of 2 years provides room for both objectives to be achieved, but as of now the inclination is very strong towards the theoretical formation.

e) Permeability and articulation of post-secondary VET level with other parts of the education system.

Permeability as a core principle of the VET system is also guaranteed in Albanian legislation. The Vocational Education and Training Law 15/2017 mentions inclusivity as one of its basic principles. The same principles are also very clearly defined in the AQF Law (Law of 2010; last amendment 2018). One of the objectives of the AQF in this regard is to improve progression and permeability within and between the systems of formal, non-formal and informal learning. As mentioned earlier, access to higher education is only possible for graduates of initial vocational education who have attended secondary school and successfully passed the vocational baccalaureate examinations. As a criterion or prerequisite on the way to higher education, the system of aggregated grade point average (GPA) is decisive for access to higher education or its rejection. Admission to higher education programs is only possible for secondary school graduates who meet the GPA criteria, which are set annually by a Decision of the Council of Ministers. The OECD (2014) recommends that graduates of initial VET programmes have the opportunity to pursue higher education and academic qualifications, as a means to meet labour market needs and expectations of students alike. In this context, the considerations in the previous subsection a) of this chapter on the possibilities of graduates of initial VET (AQF level 4 Certificate) without a State Matura to post-secondary programs offered by VET providers should also be included.

Even though both laws Law 80/2015 on Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training Law 15/2017 foresee the possibility for horizontal or vertical mobility of students, in practice this is extremely difficult. There are insignificant (if any) cases of transferability of

studies (horizontal mobility) among post-secondary programs. The vertical mobility (from a post-secondary to a Bachelor program), while allowed in principle by the Law 80/2015, has since many years been prohibited by the bylaws that regulate the students' admission and transfer of studies. A major hurdle in the horizontal mobility is the discrepancy among the tertiary and non-tertiary post-secondary programs, considering that the former (as per the Bologna process) operates in accordance with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), while the later does not. The ability to transfer the studies from one system to the other in such conditions is very limited because the load for each course and the weight it occupies in the curricula is not measured with a unified metrics.

Recommendation: *The integration of a credit system in upper secondary education would increase the opportunities for permeability. Moreover, adopting the ECTS system in the post-secondary programs delivered by the VET providers would ease horizontal mobility towards academic post-secondary programs not only within the country but also internationally. The Erasmus program now has included in its ICM (International Credit Mobility) instrument not only the mobility of students for studies but also for internships and apprenticeships, providing the opportunity for post-secondary students to engage in exchange programs.*

f) Assessment

The Law on VET (2017) and the AQF Law (2010, amended in 2018) and related secondary legislation gives the role to NAVETQ to develop, revise, and quality assure the national vocational qualifications and design the corresponding framework curricula and assessment tools for VET programs at AQF levels 2 (assistant), 3 (skilled worker), 4 (technician), and 5 (higher technician). NAVETQ has been developing labour market-related occupational qualifications and define occupational standards, which will be the basis for designing occupational qualifications, framework curricula and examination standards. NAVETQ develops assessment guidelines for the so-called orientation programs for the final examinations. Based on the principle of autonomy in the Albanian VET system, the application of the examination guidelines in the final examinations leaves considerable flexibility to the examination boards in terms of examination composition according to the rules, principles and templates (duration, process, format, evaluation system) defined in the examination guidelines. NAVETQ is responsible for supervising the organization and conduct of examinations by VET providers. This framework package is applied to vocational qualifications of AQF levels 2 to 4, but not yet in post-secondary level, as the offering of such programs has just started.

The assessment of post-secondary programs offered at the HEI is based on the quality standards defined by the Law on Higher Education (2015), the by-laws derived from it, and the quality and accreditation standards approved by the Council of Ministers (Code of Quality of Higher Education approved by DCM no. 531/2018) . On this basis, curricula, modules and learning content, as well as examination regulations are drafted and approved by the Faculty Council and Senate of each HEI. All these documents are also reviewed and evaluated by the Ministry of Education when approving the application for a new post-secondary program. Accreditation of post-secondary programs is also based on these regulations /by-laws. The ASCAL (Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in HE) has the function to overview the quality and accredit the HEI and higher education study programs, post-secondary programs included.

Recommendation: since ASCAL standards for post-secondary programs are currently under revision, it is recommended to apply the same standards based on the premise that the intended learning outcomes are the same across the post-secondary programs regardless if delivered by HEIs or VET providers. The same applies for the quality assessment and standards for work-based learning.

2.3. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) plays an important role in improving the performance of higher education institutions and VET institutions offering post-secondary VET programs. QA has been developed in higher education over the last three decades, while that in VET accreditation model is recent and builds to a great extent on that of higher education. Albania has developed a coherent framework for quality assurance and procedures to follow the recommendations of the EU, which attaches great importance to monitoring and improving quality through a combination of internal and external evaluation. This includes quality assurance processes such as accreditation, self-evaluation (internal evaluation), accreditation and inspection (external evaluation) of higher education and vocational training providers.

The legal framework for higher education and vocational education and training has recently included European standards and procedures for quality assurance. The following quality assurance procedures apply to the Albanian higher education and vocational education and training system in relation to VET-5 programs and providers:

Table 1 - Overview of quality assurance of post-secondary VET programs offered by Higher Education Institutions and VET institutions.

QA processes	Higher Education Institutions	VET Institutions (VET Schools, MFCs)
<p>Opening and closing of post-secondary VET programs by public institutions offered by public institutions</p>	<p>By Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM) Proposal from MoESY Based on: Law on HE (2015) DCM 41/2018, amended Instruction 1/2020 Application by public subject/person</p>	<p>By Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM) Proposal from MFE Based on: Law on VET (2017) Law no. 10081/2009, 'On Licences, Authorisations and Permits. Application by public subject</p>
<p>Licensing of post-secondary VET programmes offered by private providers</p>	<p>By DCM Proposal from MoESY Based on Law on HE (2015) DCM 41/2018, amended Instruction 1/2020 Application from private subject/person</p>	<p>By Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM) Responsibility of MFE and National Business Centre (QKR) Proposal from MFE Based on: Law on VET (2017) Application by private person</p>
<p>Approval of post-secondary VET programs</p>	<p>Responsibility of MoESY By Ministerial Order Draft proposed by Department of MoESY Based on Law on HE (2015) DCM 41/2018, amended Instruction 1/2020 Application from HEI</p>	<p>Responsibility of MFE By Ministerial Order Draft proposed by Department of MFE and NAVETQ, NAES Based on Law on VET (2017) Application from VET institutions</p>

<p>Closing of post-secondary programs</p>	<p>Responsibility of MoESY By Ministerial Order Draft proposed by Department of MoESY and Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAAHE) Based on Law on HE (2015) DCM 41/2018, amended Instruction 1/2020 Application from HEI</p>	<p>Responsibility of MFE By Ministerial Order Draft proposed by Department of MFE and NAVETQ, NAES Based on Law on VET (2017) Application from VET institutions</p>
<p>Regular self-assessment</p>	<p>Responsibility of HEI, based on Procedures and Deadlines for Quality Assessments within the accreditation process of HEI and Study Programs Manual, 2017</p>	<p>VET provider Minister Instruction on regulatory framework for the assessment</p>
<p>Inspection</p>	<p>Responsibility of MoESY Based on: Law on HE (2015) DCM 41/2018, amended Instruction 1/2020</p>	<p>Responsibility of MFE (Ministry responsible for Vocational Education and Training) DCM 755 / 2021, dated 9.12.2021 "On documentation, procedures, and criteria for the inspection in vocational education and training"</p>
<p>Accreditation</p>	<p>Responsibility of QAAHE and HEI Based on: Based on: Law on HE (2015) Quality Code, approved by DCM No. 531/2018 DCM No. 109/2017 Procedures and Deadlines for Quality Assessments within the accreditation process of HEI and Study Programs Manual, 2017 Application from HEI</p>	<p>Responsibility of NAVETQ Based on: Law on VET (2017) Ministerial Order 128 /Regulation (2021)</p>

3. Looking at post-secondary VET from the perspective of employers in ICT, tourism, and construction

3.1. Short description of the survey

A survey was conducted on the role of the private in the post- secondary Vocational Education Training system in Albania. A questionnaire was designed, tested, and adjusted after discussion with UNDP representatives. The questionnaire was open to responses for 2½ weeks and resulted in 107 valid answers, slightly above the objective of 100 responses. The survey was organized in 4 sections:

- general data on the company (age, size, sector)
- a sector specific section containing questions on the assessment of the skills match (company's needs with the level of graduates)
- the company's HR policy (recruitment of new employees, ulterior qualification of current employees)
- the level of cooperation among the providers of education & training and businesses

Most questions were multiple choice, but the survey included also a number of open questions, especially with regard to the incentives that the businesses need to be more interested to cooperate with the providers for the design, delivery and assessment of post-secondary programs.

3.2. Short summary of the findings and feedback from the companies

The 107 answers were divided as follows: construction sector (36 responses, 33.5%), tourism businesses (38 responses, 35.5%) and ICT (33 responses, 31%).

About 83% of the companies have been on the market for more than 3 years, while about 29% of the companies have been on the market for more than 10 years, relatively well-established companies.

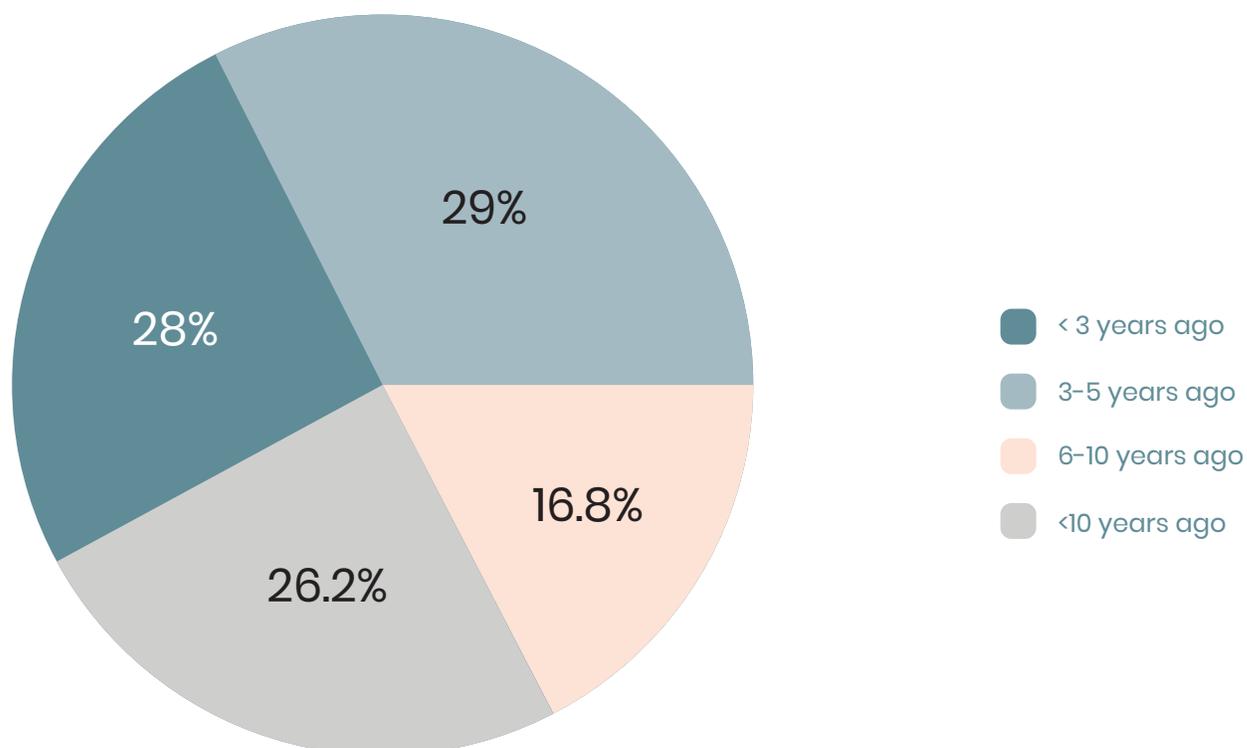
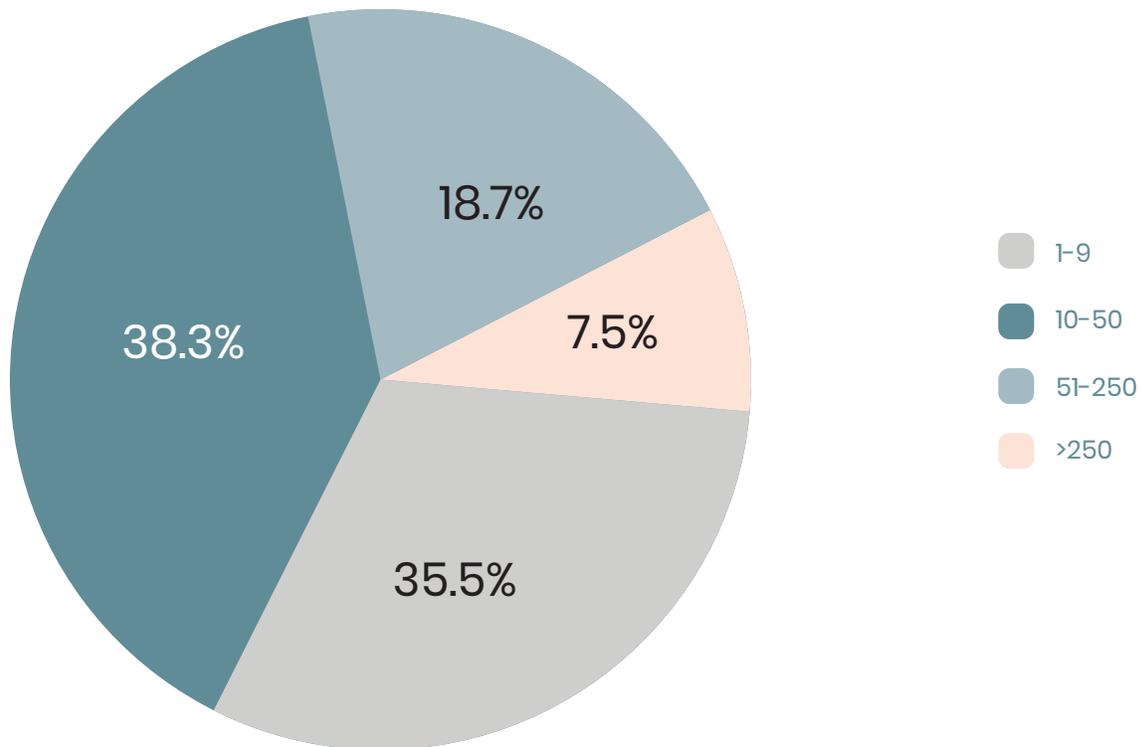


Figure 2. Age of survey companies (n=107)

The number of employees of the companies represented, is shown in Figure 3. 26.2% of the respondent-companies has over 50 employees. From this perspective, companies over 50 persons are underrepresented in this survey, considering the composition of the Albanian economy, where SMEs count for about 90% of the entire businesses. However, this bias is not necessarily negative, as very small companies are not the first ones to be involved in post-secondary VET.



Educational qualifications

Around 86% of employers consider employees in the construction sector to be well qualified. Only about 11% believe that employees are not adequately trained, and about 3% consider employees to be overqualified. About 71% of employers in the tourism industry consider employees to be well qualified, while about 26% consider them to be inadequate or underqualified.

In the construction sector, for the professional positions of technician or construction manager about 47% of the employers surveyed consider the vocational school qualification (initial VET, AQF level 4) to be suitable, while about 39% of the companies think that it is not sufficient. These different opinions can be considered positive not only for post-secondary VET, but also for upper secondary VET. If about 40% of employers are in favour of post-secondary education for mid-level positions as technicians or mid-level managers, it means that there is a considerable need for this level of qualification in the labour market. This result can also be distinguished from the other response, according to which about 60% of employers believe that a university education is not necessary for this purpose. About 30% of the employers are in favour of a university education for this purpose.

In tourism, 75% of respondents do not consider a high school diploma sufficient to work as a hotel manager or tourism agent/operator. On the other hand, not more than 59% of respondents see higher education as necessary. The discrepancy shows that there is room for post-secondary VET as an intermediate level.

In ICT, two frequent occupations are network technician and graphic and multimedia design. For these occupations, 51% of respondents consider a vocational school certificate to be insufficient and around 50% consider a university education not necessary. This means that vocational school education is also of considerable importance on the labour market for these occupations.

Upper secondary vocational education and the difference with the upper secondary level of general education.

About 72% of employers in the construction sector answer that they have employees with an upper secondary vocational education degree, which is a confirmation that this type of education is well known in Albania and there is a good demand in the labour market for this degree in the construction sector.

A clear majority of tourism companies (71%) say they have employed vocational school graduates in their company, which shows that there is already a job market for vocational training in this field. 75% of respondents emphasize the advantage of vocational school graduates compared to employees with a secondary school diploma.

In ICT, 57% of the respondents answered that they have employed people with secondary vocational education and 80% consider the skills of these qualification higher in comparison with general education (Gymnasium).

Consideration of the post-secondary vocational education and the difference with the upper secondary level of general education and vocational education.

Noteworthy is that about 47% of employers in the construction sector have hired graduates of higher vocational education. Considering the relatively short time since the beginning of the study of higher vocational education (about 13 years ago, since 2007 - University of Durrës) and the fact that most of them started in the last 8-10 years, such positioning of graduates of higher vocational education on the labour market shows that a demand is met. About 71% of employers recognize the difference (a clearly adequate education) in the qualification of graduates of higher vocational education compared to high school graduates. This result is comparable to that of vocational schools. On the other hand, only about 18% of employers recognize a clearly better education and about 32% recognize a better training of higher vocational education graduates compared to vocational school graduates.

66% of tourism companies have employed post-secondary VET graduates, which is considered a relatively high percentage considering that post-secondary VET courses in this field have been offered at Albanian educational institutions for about 10-12 years. Moreover, the better or more suitable qualification of post-secondary VET graduates compared to high school graduates and vocational education graduates is noted by 86% of the companies.

Post-secondary VET graduates appear to be in a good position on the ICT job market and are well known among employers. 55% of companies report that they have employed people with post-secondary VET degrees. About 69% of respondents recognize the advantage of these graduates compared to high school graduates and about 62% compared to vocational school graduates.

Ranking of skills according to their importance for mid-level occupations.

The survey results show that employers in the construction sector consider the knowledge and skills for workplace safety and security to be 'necessary' and 'important', which is related to the positioning of the technician skill level as a middle management level in the labour market. Employers described and rated the required skills for mid-level electrical

technicians very highly, where practical application skills predominating.

Companies in the tourism sector are capable of distinguishing what skills and knowledge are needed by employees in different types and levels of jobs. This is also clearly reflected in the differences in the skills required for the professions in this sector, or traders, hotel managers.

ICT companies are also able to differentiate and classify the required qualifications for network technicians and multimedia technicians much more precisely compared to the other two sectors, i.e. construction and tourism, which speaks for a higher level of qualification of the management and technical leadership of companies, especially large companies, in the ICT sector.

Companies' perceptions of the medium-term (3-5 years) development of demand for skills in their respective industries.

About 75% of employers in the construction sector consider graduates' software skills and new technologies as a priority, which is also related to ICT development. In the survey, some employers emphasize practical skills as the biggest deficit in the graduates' qualification and therefore consider practical training as a priority for all levels of education in Albania.

Companies in the tourism sector are very aware that the most important knowledge and skills for the next 3 to 5 years are in ICT (especially data analytics), media and social media, environmental and cultural knowledge, and customer care (personalized service, etc.).

The higher level of know-how in the ICT sector is also reflected in companies' perceptions of the skills required by employees in the ICT sector in the next 3 to 5 years, with great importance attached to new technologies or developments in the ICT sector (cloud computing, automation, cybersecurity, Big Data, business analytics, machine learning).

Hiring new employees

The results on the order of criteria in hiring new employees shows that about 79% of respondents ranked work experience as the most important criterion in the recruitment process. For young graduates this is of course difficult. 42% mentioned 'practical training', which suggests that practical training during studies is found important. The formal aspects of the degree (diploma, diploma supplement) count for 25% of the respondents, much less than practical training. Other criteria, such as letters of recommendation, etc., are considered by only 19% of the companies.

Competence levels of graduates

In the following table, the answers are shows regarding competence levels of the recent graduates upon entering the labour market.



Figure 4. Competence levels (n=107)

For all skills, (close to) average levels prevail. For digital, foreign language and communication skills, the “above average” level dominates, while for technical practical skills, the “unsatisfactory” and “satisfactory” levels predominate. This suggests that graduates have been trained better in foreign languages, ICT and communication than in technical-practical skills.

Answers on the need for training their current employees, are given in the following table (n=107).

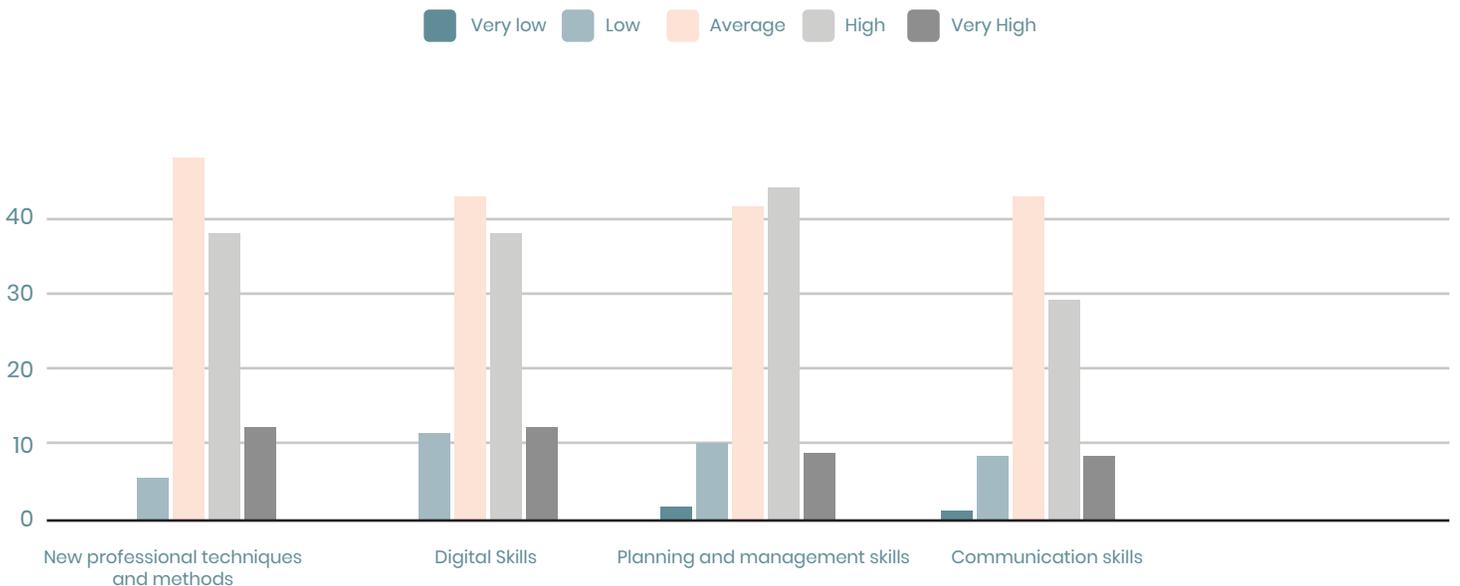


Figure 5. Skills needed (n=107)

A majority of respondents considers employee training in the areas of technology/new professional methods, ICT, planning and management, communication to be necessary. About 92% of the respondents stated that their companies provide support to support employee training in various forms, e.g., providing time for training within working hours (54%), training programs in the company (46%), financing of training in the company. However, while asked for the reasons to not support their employees to upskill / reskill, 41% of the respondents have provided reasons for the to be reluctant to support training, such as fear that trained staff will leave the company, costs of training courses'- dissatisfaction with the quality of training in the country.

Digital transformation and digital skills

70% of respondents state that their companies are undergoing a digital transformation process. Moreover, 72% of the companies recognize the need to for employees with good digital skills. This opinion of the companies in Albania can be considered very positive and contemporary and is a confirmation that the private sector follows the international technical and technological development in the respective industries.

Post-secondary VET

It turns out that about 76% of the companies are familiar with post-secondary VET. It is, however, important to note that there might be a bias involved, considering that the methodology for the outreach of respondents relied on the snowball method starting with the network of the industry partners of POLIS University. Thus, a positive bias is likely. However, the cooperation between the educational institutions and companies in the implementation of these study programs is quite limited, as the following table shows.

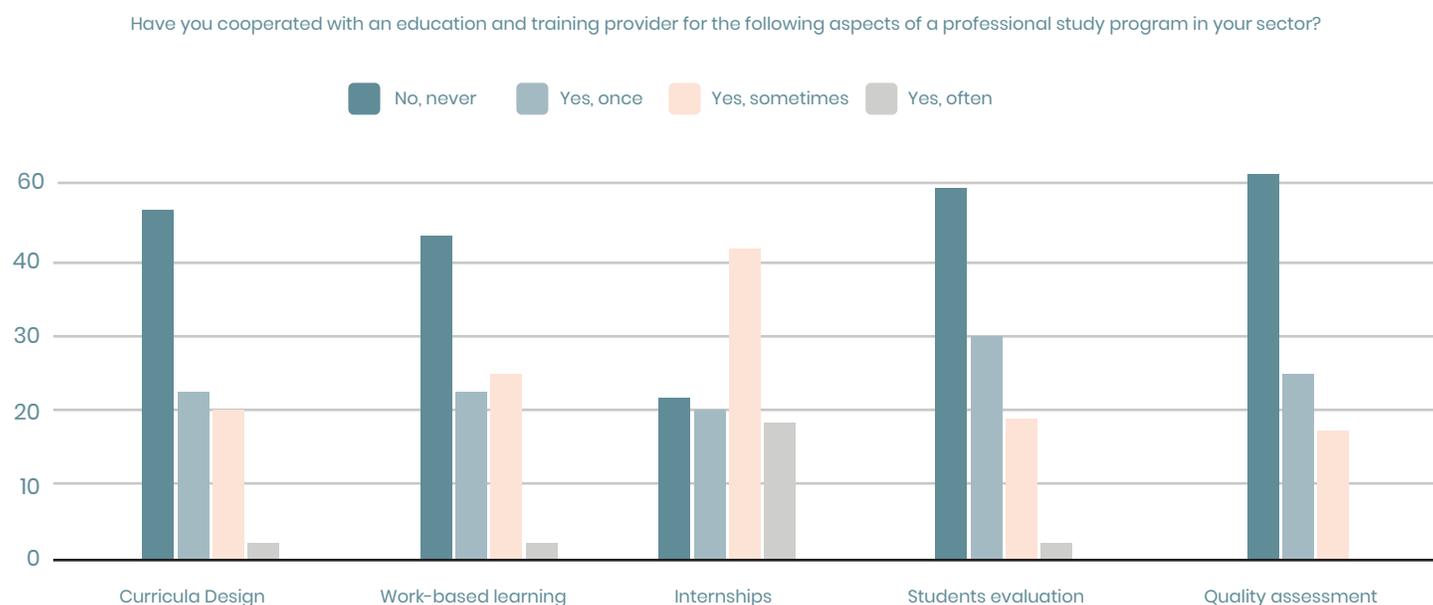


Figure 6. Private sector – education cooperation VET-5 (n=107)

This result may be seen as an indication that private sector – educational sector has less need to cooperate when the theory-practice ratio is low, i.e. when limited practical training during the study period is offered.

Respondents were asked about the potential interest of their company to train future employees together with the education institutions, by having them have part of their studies working in the company. The answer to this question was dominated by ‘yes, interested’ (49%), while ‘don’t know’ got 29% answers and ‘no, not interested’ 22% for reasons such as ‘no one asked me’, ‘time involved in training’ and ‘preference for hiring new trained employees. It should be mentioned that answering this question is far from easy; respondents tend to react on the present situation but would have to have to imagine a well-working collaboration between the private sector and education, resulting in graduates that have stronger practical skills than current graduates.

Companies gave a range of answers to the questions about the incentives needed to engage in a dual/work- based learning education model for post-secondary VET programs with higher education institutions. Ordering the answers in categories and deciphering the intentions, it can be concluded that:

- the demand for well-educated graduates is high, practical training is wanted, but companies want some security regarding their investment in training students (commitment, attitude of the students, etc.)
- companies stressed the need for adopting curricula and courses of study to the needs of the labour market, with special attention to practical training. The construction sector mentioned that much work is done through sub-contractors, and that needs special attention;
- fiscal incentives or compensation are said to be welcome for engaging in training graduates. However, it was also remarked that for companies it is an investment in its own HR capital.

Key points from the surveys

The picture that appears from the survey confirms some premises and adds value to current insights.

- to start with the latter: post-secondary VET is better known than what was perhaps expected. As an educational option, it is recognized, and companies hire graduates with a post-secondary diploma.
- confirmed is the premise that post-secondary VET is not sufficiently practice oriented.
- confirmed is also that relationships between private sector and educational institutions are quite limited. Businesses have some reservation to start collaboration with educational institutions.

It may not come as a surprise that businesses find it hard to confirm an interest to collaborate with educational institutions. The initiative for adjusting post-secondary VET education to achieve more relevance for practice, for demands of employers and for the labour market, should come from educational institutions. This cannot be expected from (individual)

businesses. Business organizations (chambers of commerce and the like) may plead for more relevant education, but so far, the response from the educational sector has been apathetic.

Reflections from interviews

Interviews from representatives from the three selected sectors, were conducted to validate the survey results. The interviewed respondents seemed to know VET programs but were not always able to make a clear distinction among the set of skills of the upper secondary and post-secondary VET programs. That was slightly better for the construction sector, where the hierarchy in the constructions sites is done in compliance with skills and competences that in return corresponded to the respective VET. The inherited tradition from the past of “low” and “high” technicians makes for a better understanding of the differences among secondary and post-secondary VET.

The somewhat surprising large share of respondents that claim to support the training / qualification of their employees was brought up, and it appears that the “in-house training programs” are often informal and non-structured, consisting mostly of job-shadowing practices and guidance from senior employees. The need for reskilling or upskilling the current workforce seems a lesser priority as opposed to the recruitment of new staff. The need for better digital skills of the employees was however by and large recognized by all the respondents.

The observation that graduates lack practical skills was dominant regardless of the sector. The idea to cooperate with universities to address this issue is welcome but limited resources (time, people, etc.) to do that for a critical mass of people is seen as an obstacle. Moreover, when a trained employee leaves the company, that effort would have gone to waste. To overcome this hurdle, fiscal and legal incentives were mentioned vaguely, but also very specific suggestions were brought forth like:

- having the trainees sign exclusive contracts with the company for a period of 3-5 years after completing a program;
- having the classes delivered during the afternoon or during the weekends by the education providers so that the trainee could spend more time at the company;
- having the companies involved since the design of the program / curriculum and not just for short-term internships.

From interviews with education providers, an emerging challenge was the difficulty to design and deliver post-secondary VET programs that would be beneficial to both: upper secondary VET degree holders and graduates from the general high school. The latter constitute the largest share of the students’ body in post-secondary VET programs. This means that the programs are designed to train the participants assuming no prior knowledge on the topic, therefore making it hard for upper secondary VET graduates to see value in pursuing their qualification in post-secondary level. This obstructs the permeability of the education system and re-emphasizes the need for lifelong learning programs next to post-secondary VET.

Another suggestion for a more permeable system, was for the current regulatory framework

on higher education to ease the barriers for the transfer of studies from post-secondary VET to Bachelor programs.

The accreditation process should include clearer provisions on work-based learning or dual education models, so that when encountered with such practices in their monitoring visits the external experts are already informed and knowledgeable.

Finally, during the interviews a question about the number of employees with disabilities was brought up. None of the respondents had a positive reaction. While these category faces many barriers to access education in all levels, upper secondary and post-secondary VET programs constitute an under-exploited opportunity to ease their integration in the labour market. Sensibilization towards inclusiveness remains very low in Albania, from the education provider and employers alike. Concrete measures to reinforce it must be developed and implemented from the policymakers, starting with education so that students with disabilities are adequately trained and later with employers so that non-discriminatory policies and practices are in place.

4. Current Landscape of post-secondary VET in Albania

4.1. Post-secondary VET as part of the VET system

4.1.1. Characteristics of non-tertiary post-secondary VET programs

As formerly mentioned, the post-secondary programs can be provided by both: Vocational Education Schools and Centres and Higher Education Institutions. Their delivery by the former is still very recent (no graduates yet), therefore the data are limited making the analysis difficult and eventual results premature and questionable. Only 5 study programs are presented on the NAVETQ website. Below, the most important characteristics of these study programs are explained.

Table 2: Post-secondary VET programs offered by VET Schools and Multi-functional Centres (VET providers) and their main characteristics

VET 5 Study program	Main Characteristics
Shipping services	1 year; 1180 teaching hours; school-based theory; school-based practical training and 640 hours Work-based in-company training. 54 % in-company practical training. Access of VET-4-2 students even without a State Matura. Access of graduates with a state Matura (Level 4-1) Access for adults working in this industry Access for students with disabilities (providing proper conditions)
Food lab analysis	1 year; 1050 teaching hours; school-based theory and practical training; no in-company practical training. Access of VET-4-2 students even without a State Matura. Access of graduates with a state Matura (Level 4-1) Access for adults working in this industry Access for students with disabilities (providing proper conditions)
Autoservice Management	1 year; 1050 teaching hours; school-based theory and practical training; no in-company practical training. Access of VET-4-2 students even without a State Matura. Access of graduates with a state Matura (Level 4-1) Access for adults working in this industry Access for students with disabilities (providing proper conditions)

<p>Vocational training trainer</p>	<p>1 year: 990 teaching hours; school-based theory; school-based practical training and 450 hours Work-based in-company training. 45 % in-company practical training. Access of VET-4-2 students even without a State Matura. Access of graduates with a state Matura (Level 4-1) Access for adults working in this industry Access for students with disabilities (providing proper conditions)</p>
<p>Fashion Design</p>	<p>2 years; 2100 teaching hours; school-based theory and practical training; no in-company practical training. Access of VET-4-2 students even without a State Matura. Access of graduates with a state Matura (Level 4-1) Access for adults working in this industry Access for students with disabilities (providing proper conditions)</p>

From Table 2 it can be concluded that post-secondary programs offered by VET high schools and MFCs can generally be characterized as follows:

- are regulated by the VET Law (2017) and the Law on AQF (2010, amended in 2018) and by-laws derived from them;
- guarantee access for graduates of upper secondary VET (VET 4-2) with and without a State Matura;
- guarantee access also for graduates of high schools with state Matura;
- guarantee access for adults
- guarantee access for students with disabilities
- shorter duration (up to 2 years, usually 1 year);
- they all have substantial practical training foreseen in the curricula, either school-based or in-company trainings

4.1.2. The Case of the Technical Economic School of Tirana with the post-secondary Programme “Fashion-Design”

Even though, post-secondary programs delivered by VET schools or MFCs, are only in a pilot phase, the interviews with the providers already reveal a number of challenges and point out to room for intervention. Describing her experience with the post-secondary program “Fashion Design”, Dr. Anila Bani identified 3 major issues:

- The regulatory framework is incomplete. The VET law lays out the main principles, but the annual Orders or Directives for VET do not include specific provisions for post-secondary programs, leaving the providers to operate in vacuum when it comes to aspects like the size of the classes (minimal and maximal number of students), the attendance, recognition of prior knowledge or former attendance of specific modules. Additionally, the load of the program (6 hrs / day; 5 days/ week) might be suitable for students but makes it very difficult for adults to attend these programs. She saw this as one of the main reasons for the drop of enrolled participants from 16 in the first year to 8 in the subsequent academic year. Unlike the

post-secondary programs delivered by HEIs, these programs do not issue a diploma /degree, just a certificate. It is therefore not only necessary but also sensible to adopt a more flexible organization of the programs, in order for them to accommodate the needs of working adults.

- As previously mentioned, another pressing issue is staffing. In order for post-secondary programs to bring an added value to upper secondary VET graduates and even more so to adults, it is necessary to engage highly skilled staff and professionals with experience and expertise. The current remuneration rates make that unrealistic. Dr. Bani explained that while they were able to attract some very qualified instructors in the first year, they were unable to keep them for the upcoming year. As of now, most of the trainers engaged in the post-secondary programs are the same as in the upper-secondary VET.
- The third issue pointed out is the need for specific infrastructure and labs for the post-secondary programs. As it stands, the post-secondary programs are making use of the existing infrastructure at VET schools, which can cater for some of the needs but not for the specific requirements of the program, at least in the case of “Fashion Design”. This however was considered a lesser challenge compared to the regulatory and HR aspects.

Recommendations:

- i) Regulate the delivery of post-secondary programs in VET schools and MFCs through specific legal acts that foresee provisions on attendance, transfer and knowledge recognition, tailoring the work load and time-schedule in order to ease access for adults*
- ii) Apply a tuition fee, (even if at a low / social rate). This is not expected to affect the demand for these programs (as there are a number of courses delivered privately in the field of fashion design that have a steady demand from the market). On the other hand, it will provide an additional funding source, besides the state budget, that can enable the providers to increase the remuneration rate for the trainers / instructors.*

4.2. Post-secondary programs as part of the higher education offer

In chapter 2, paragraph 2.1.a the legal framework for post-secondary as part of higher education was discussed. Law on HE (2015) and Law on AQF (2010, amended 2018) as well as by-laws derived from them regulate the post-secondary as part of higher education. This legal framework, in particular the AQF Act (2018 amendment), defines the VET 5 programs offered by higher education institutions as “non-university study program post-secondary vocational education professional certificate”. According the Law on HE (2015). higher education institutions can offer VET-5 at AQF level 5 with 60 or 120 ECTS. The duration of the study program is 1 or 2 academic years and at the end of the study a “Professional Certificate “ or “ Professional Diploma “, respectively, is obtained in the relevant field of study.

All post-secondary programs as part of higher education are offered by higher education institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences, vocational academies). Currently, post-secondary programs account for a significant share of higher education (about 15 % of matriculated baccalaureate students, which is comparable to other European countries). Based on the ASCAL database about 90 % belong to applied sciences, while 17 programs are offered in ICT, 14 in tourism and 12 in construction. More than 90 % of the higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country offer such study programs and are therefore distributed in all major cities of the country (Tirana, Durres, Shkodra, Elbasan, Korca, Vlora and Gjirokastra).

According to the Albanian Law on Higher Education (2015), the minimum average grade of the Matura exams for admission to the bachelor’s degree program is set by a government decision, while all high school graduates who have passed Matura exams can be admitted to the post-secondary programs. The increase in the number of post-secondary programs and students is mainly related to an administrative criterion, namely the limitation of the average grade (all high school graduates who have achieved a grade point average below 6,5 are allowed to apply only to post-secondary programs). Such a criterion does not necessary lead to an increase in the quality of studies and the qualification level of graduates. On the contrary, it can have a profound discriminatory effect, since more than 90% of the enrolled students come from the poorer families and poorer regions of the country and this form of tertiary education can be considered as a lesser form of qualification (10).

Adult participation in training and upskilling constitutes an important part of VET. In Albania it is still very low.

4.2.1 Survey with Providers of Post-Secondary Programs in Higher Education

A survey with providers of post-secondary programs (no. respondents is 12), highlights the need for policy interventions in order to improve the quality and therefore the attractiveness of post-secondary education and training in Albania. While the potential number of students for such programs is higher (due to the increase in the minimum average grade that provides access to Bachelor degrees), only 25% of the surveyed providers reports a growth in the number of enrolled students in the last 3 years.

What is the trend of students enrolment(last 3 years average)?

12 responses

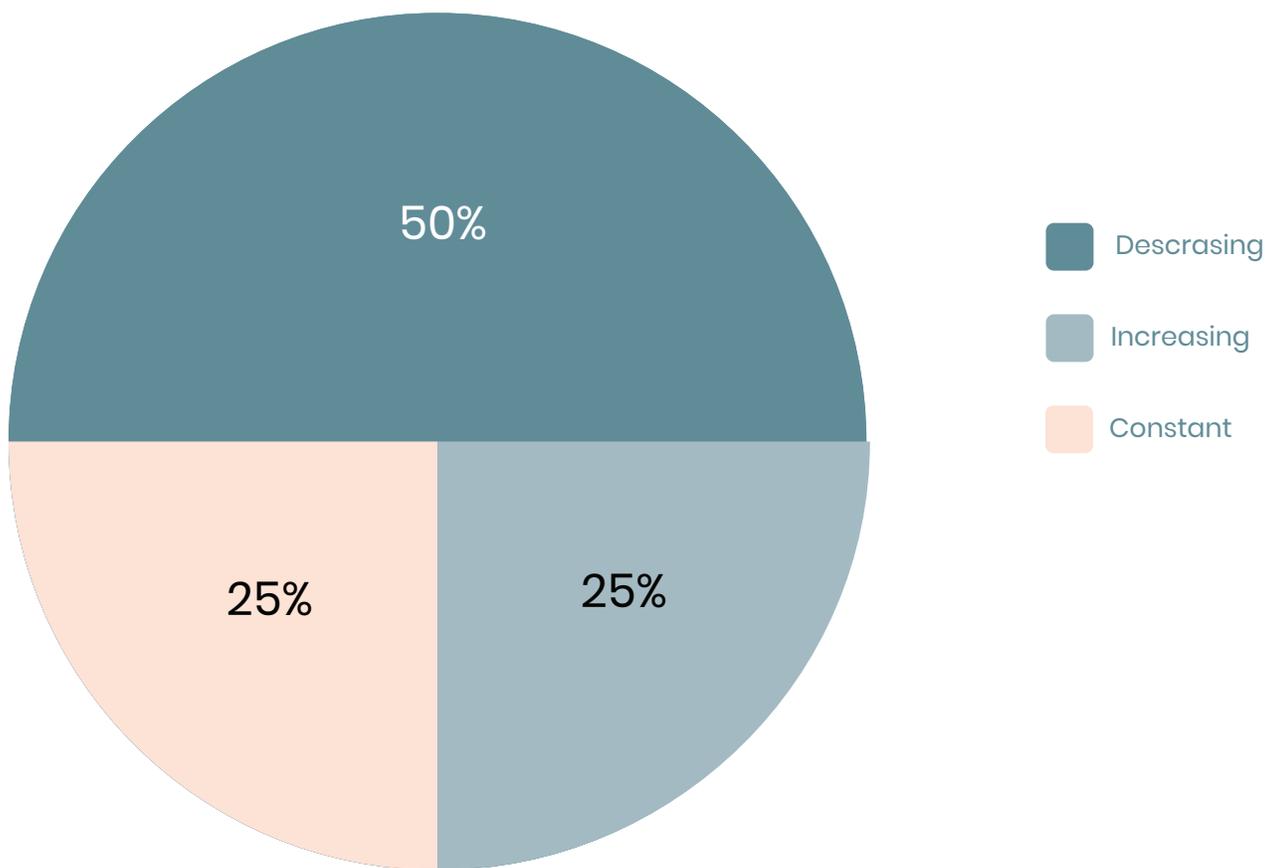


Figure 7: Trend of registered students (average of the last 3 years)

With the current data, we can only speculate on the potential reasons for the inability of post-secondary programs to transform the potential demand to real demand, however, there are three factors that can be mentioned:

- The visibility of such programs remains low and their image poor
- Demographic: lower number of high school graduates in total and high share of graduates that leave the country to study abroad
- Quality: the post-secondary programs remain highly theoretical and do not respond to the market needs, reducing therefore their value in the eyes of prospect students

This enrolment trend can also explain the hesitation of the providers to open new post-secondary programs. Only 17% of the respondents intend to open new programs.

Do you intend to open other post secondary VET programs in the next 3 years?
12 responses

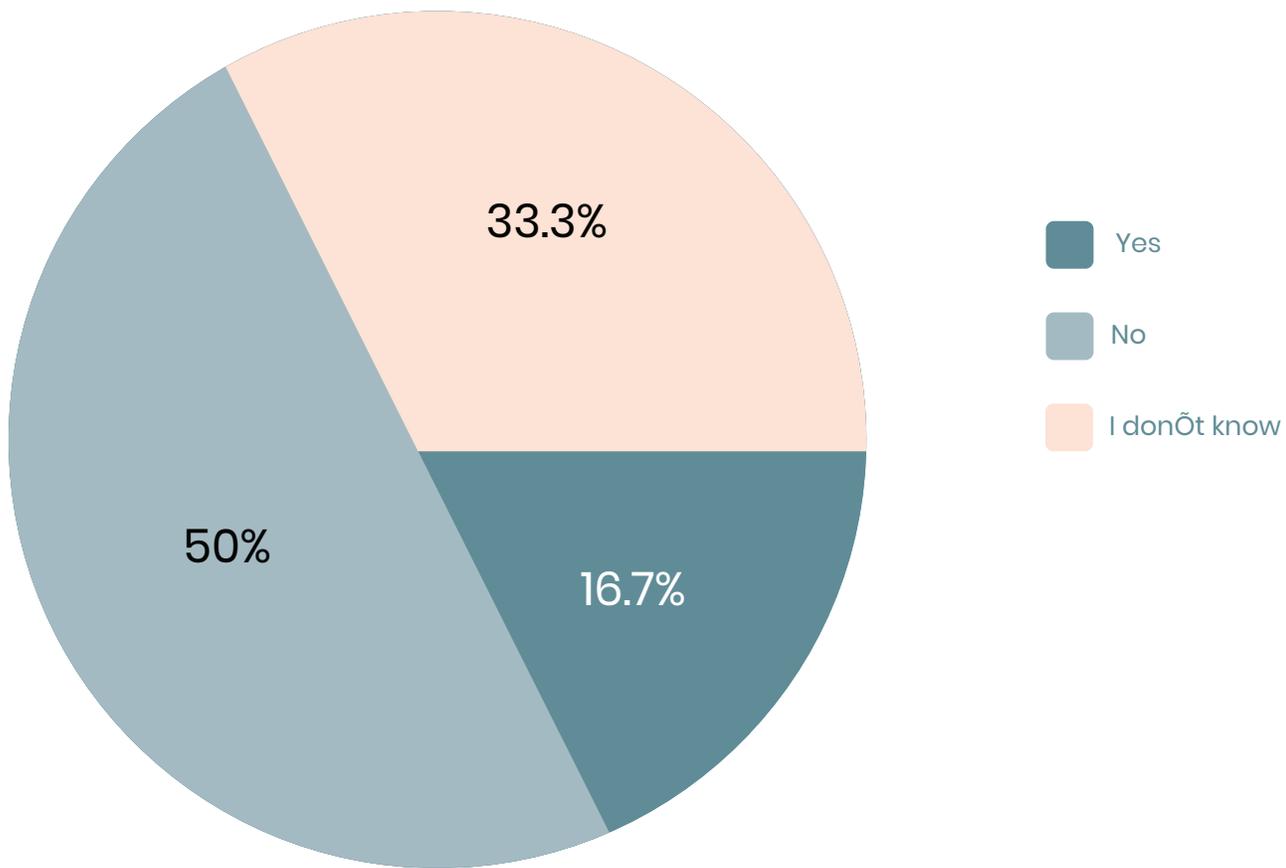


Figure 8 – Intention to open new post-professional study programs

While asked for the reasons why / why not, the mentioned reasons include the low number of enrolled students and the need to improve the quality and the organization of practices of the existing programs.

Besides the survey, six practices of Post-Secondary VET programs in the vocational education and higher education in Albania were selected that belong to the selected industry sectors (ICT, construction, and tourism) and are offered by different HEIs. The following table shows these six VET-3 study programs and their main characteristics.

Table 3: Post-secondary VET programs offered by Higher Education Institutions and their main characteristics

Post-Secondary VET Programs	Duration (years) Workload ECTS	Type of Degree	Practical Training percentage in total ECTS and type	Final examination or thesis	Admission criteria	Characterization of practical training
CT (Tirana Professional College)	2 years, 120 ECTS	Professional Diploma	10 ECTS or 8,3 %	Final exam or Study project	Level 4 with State Matura	School based practical training
Computer Network Maintenance (Polis Univ.)	2 years, 120 ECTS	Professional Diploma	24 ECTS or 20%	Study project	Level 4 with State Matura	School-based practical training (12 ECTS) Combined with Internship (12 ECTS)
Construction Manager (Univ. of Durres)	2 years, 120 ECTS	Professional Diploma	16 ECTS (13,3%)	No final exam or study project	Level 4 with State Matura	School-based practical training (8 ECTS) Combined with Internship (8 ECTS)
Energy Efficiency (Polis Univ.)	2 years, 120 ECTS	Professional Diploma	24 ECTS or 20%	Study project	Level 4 with State Matura	School-based practical training (12 ECTS) Combined with Internship (12 ECTS)
Tourism, Hotel and Event Management (Metropolitan University)	2 years, 120 ECTS	Professional Diploma	6 ECTS (5%)	Final exam	Level 4 with State Matura	School-based practical training
Tourism (Tirana European Univ.)	2 years, 120 ECTS	Professional Diploma	5 ECTS (4,2%)	Final exam or study project	Level 4 with State Matura	School-based practical training

Main characteristics of the post-secondary programs presented above can be summarised as follows:

- a) All post-secondary VET study programs have a workload of 120 ECTS and last 2 years. The fact that no HEI offers a shorter post-secondary study program of 1 year with 60 ECTS means that HEIs do not trust to offer highly emphasised vocational and practical study programs and therefore they tend to offer longer and not highly practical study programs.
- b) All post-secondary VET programs of study guarantee admission only to graduates with State Matura (VET 4-1 and VET 4-2), but not to those with School Final Examination.
- c) Most of the post-secondary programs are more theoretically oriented.

This report stressed the disadvantages, but it must be stressed that it also gives some advantages; students have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of basic subjects and improve their general education, which would be important for later continuation of vocational studies (e.g. in the form of a dual or part-time Bachelor's degree). In this context, it should also be kept in mind that the majority of vocational students come from modest, often underdeveloped regions and also from the most modest general schools and vocational high schools in the country. Further, basic skills are critical both for labour market success and to support further learning. Professional education and training programs should ensure adequate literacy and numeracy skills among their students alongside occupation-specific competencies.

- d) The overview of the curricula of the post-secondary programs currently offered in different HEIs in Albania shows that in these programs the practical training directly in the company is very limited and far below the required minimum practical time as Work-based Learning (WBL), which should be at least 25 % of the total study time (OECD, 2014). Only one HEI (Polis University) has an optimal share of practical training together with the study project accounting for approx. 33-35 ECTS or more than 25 % of the total learning workload.

4.2.2. The Case of Polis University with the Post-Secondary Program on Energy Efficiency

The post-secondary program on Energy Efficiency at POLIS University is the outcome of a TEMPUS project, "Developing and Adapting Professional Programs for Energy Efficiency in the Western Balkans" - DAPEEWB, Project Nr. 543782-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-AL-TEMPUS-JPCR.

It is very important to acknowledge the role that the project played because back than post-secondary programs constituted a novelty for Albania and references were lacking.

It was due to the professional support of international experts in the curriculum design, their assistance in setting up and equipping the efficiency laboratory with modern technology, the development of proper methodologies (including practice-based hours and in-company training) and more importantly the Training of Trainers that enabled the development and implementation of the program.

At that time, POLIS University, together with the "Aleksandër Moisiu" University of Durrës, were the two pioneering Albanian institutions which starting offering post-secondary VET programs. They served as pilots for ASCAL (then APAAL – the Public Agency for the Accreditation of Higher Education) with regard to the quality assessment of post-secondary programs.

While the lab enables the possibility to provide practical skills to students in house, in-company trainings constitute a good part of the program. The cooperation with the businesses remains the most important but also one of the most challenging aspects in its delivery.

Since then, the program has graduated 8 generations of students, with very high employability rate in the country and abroad. Building on this experience and making use of the lab

infrastructure, POLIS now delivers LLL courses on Energy Audit and Energy Management, as well as an annual Summer School in cooperation with the UN Energy Community.

5. The Way Forward

This chapter summarizes main conclusions and describes concrete approaches and modalities for introducing and implementing VET programs at post-secondary and higher education that are in line with a national policy orientation for workforce development at all ages and through diversified pathways.

The overarching conclusion of this report is that post-secondary VET is a valuable educational option, but that the relevance in the real-world needs to be seriously enhanced to serve students and employers. A mismatch between demand and supply for labour exists; on the one hand there is high unemployment in Albania, especially among younger people. On the other hand, socially more dynamic companies have problems to find the right future employees. Education in general and post-secondary VET in particular should better align with the demands, not only current but especially future demands, for new employees.

5.1. Conclusions

In order to fundamentally improve the quality of post-secondary VET education in Albania, according to the recommendations of OECD (2014) and the experience of other countries (not only Germany, Austria, Switzerland, but also countries in the WB Region such as Serbia), increasing the share of in-company training in the post-secondary VET curriculum is of great importance. For this reason, a gradual restructuring of the current post-secondary VET study programs according to the dual education model, would be highly recommended, at least in the priority areas such as construction, tourism and ICT, which also reflects the objectives of the Albanian government in the field of vocational education and higher education .

The new Law on Employment Promotion (15/2019) and derived DCM 17/2020 on the promotion of employment provide a good base for practical training for unemployed people, jobseekers and graduates, i.e. after graduation, who have not been employed for up to 2 years after graduation. But it does not serve well for the practical training of students during their studies. These legal frameworks also provide a very solid basis for companies and employers. There is also a need for a comparable model to support students and companies that offer internships for students. Without support or incentives for companies to participate in the practical training of students, this seems very difficult to be realized.

In order to regulate all aspects of practical training of students, including the cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises required for this purpose, it seems necessary to adopt a separate government resolution and corresponding ministerial regulations.

The Higher Education Law (80/2015) does not contain detailed provisions on practical training during period of study. However, this has been made up for in the relevant by-law, namely the DCM 879/2019. According to this by-law, the practical training component is included in the category of “Supplementary subjects” (category D) of the curriculum of post-secondary program. This category includes the acquisition of foreign language skills,

information technology and telematics, communication and presentation, labour market related knowledge and practical training in public and private companies/institutions within the framework of joint target agreements. According to this by-law, all these subjects within this category of subjects must not exceed 15% of the total ECTS. However, the footnote to this regulation states that the ratio between theory and practice in VET-5 programs should be 50/50, with the proportion of practical training in the company not less than 25% of the total academic credit points (ECTS). However, this regulation was adopted only two years ago. Consequently, all post-secondary programs started before 2019 have not followed this new criterion but have more or less followed the criteria for classical bachelor's degree programs in terms of the ratio between theory and practice, in which practical training takes less than 5% of the total ECTS of the curriculum.

The reason for the insufficient practical training in the current post-secondary VET programs is that they are not based on close cooperation between universities and companies or Social Partners (WLP). Without solid practical training and good cooperation with WLP, the outcomes of post-secondary programs remain of low quality and graduates do not have good employment opportunities.

The WBL is the basis of dual education, which is based on close cooperation between company - university, strong participation of the WLP in the design of the study program and, above all, in the implementation of the practical training of the students. Cooperation between higher education, business and industry thus plays a crucial role and thus represents the greatest challenge for the realisation of practice-integrated study programs, not only at the post-secondary level, but also at other higher levels, namely dual or professional bachelor's or master's programs. This challenge is even greater and more difficult in the case of Albania, which is not only related to the lack of tradition in this field, but also to other factors. In this context, two important factors should be mentioned, namely the size of the company and the level of qualification of the management as well as of the professionals employed in the company.

Post-secondary and tertiary VET should be demand-driven, with an eye for longer term development – as employers may be biased towards the short term.

Post-secondary VET labour market responsiveness remains limited

Both surveys with employers and HEI alike, emphasize the need for a well-qualified workforce with higher technical skills. However, the rigid regulative framework and limited capacities of higher education institutions hamper the design and delivery of labour market relevant and practical post-secondary VET programs. Practical learning still makes for an insignificant share of the entire post-secondary VET programs.

Requirements for an effective education and training system

Post-secondary VET is a relatively new pathway compared to the more traditional and well known initial vocational education and training and higher education. Therefore, the systems need to opt for quality infrastructure, adequately trained and adequately rewarded teaching staff, methodologies, and teaching material). This aspect includes both post-secondary non-tertiary and tertiary post-secondary VET programs.

Role of social partners

Despite several dedicated efforts in the VET legal framework and its implementation, the role of the social partners in the design, development, and delivery of VET programs (upper secondary and post-secondary (including higher VET) is still at an initial stage.

The case of post-secondary VET in the Albanian education system has yet to be built. Employers are aware of the need for higher skills, yet they cannot recognize the value added of HEI post-secondary VET graduates. Potential learners (students), on the other hand, do not opt for post-secondary VET programs as their first choice. The pathways are almost not accessible for working adults aiming to reskill or upskill.

Post-secondary VET programs and permeability options

Despite principles mentioned in all three main laws, secondary legislation and the organization of the entire education system makes it impossible for any horizontal or vertical permeability. The case of post-secondary programs offered by HEI is an explicit example of this. Although the Law on Higher Education (80/2015) allows for access to bachelor's programs, regulations (secondary legislation) makes it impossible.

Career guidance

It is important that students have access to qualified career counselling because even though the system must be designed as demand-driven, mismatches among demand and supply are to be expected.

In order to improve the aforementioned aspects of the post-secondary VET programs in Albania, a matrix of recommendation has been developed.

5.2. Matrix of recommendations

Target group / Timeframe	Policymakers	VET providers	Businesses
<p>Short term interventions</p>	<p><u>Accessibility</u> The centralized and rigid admission process for tertiary post-secondary programs obstructs the accessibility for different target groups, especially adults. Additionally, a rigid offer hampers the system's ability to be adaptable and proactive regarding the market needs, therefore the regulatory framework should revise the current provisions on the admission procedures to tertiary post-secondary programs aiming to ease the access for the different eligible categories.</p> <p><u>Assessment of VET trainers</u> Besides purely academic qualifications, an important weight in the quality of staff should be the professional experience (3 - 5 years). Another criterion about the teaching / training staff is to differentiate among the staff involved in the post-secondary programs to those in the secondary programs be it in terms of qualifications (non-necessarily academic) and the remuneration.</p>	<p><u>Accessibility</u> The admission procedures for post-secondary non tertiary programs could be better defined and more elaborated in terms of criteria but also selection process. In addition to the school final exam, other criteria could certainly be adapted with regard to the vocational subjects and also the practical skills, and even an entrance examination. This could possibly also reduce the pressure of vocational students to necessarily take a vocational Matura.</p> <p>All providers of post-secondary VET programs must establish an effective relation with the responsible bodies/ people for the career counselling in upper secondary education schools and work closely with them so that prospectus students receive full and accurate information on the offer and benefits of post-secondary programs.</p> <p><u>Responsiveness to market needs</u> Like in the case of non-tertiary post-secondary programs for the inclusion and representation of the Social Partners in the governance and management of the school / program, the tertiary post-secondary programs should also engage the business sector in a meaningful way (in all aspects of the program: design – delivery – assessment – revision). This would help build a systemic and effective feedback loop from the market that will bring the program's outcome closer to the market's needs.</p>	<p><u>Responsiveness to market needs</u> Businesses should provide clear and direct inputs and feedback to the providers, keeping in mind not only the current but also the eventual future needs of the labor market.</p>

Assessment of VET trainers
Besides purely academic qualifications, an important weight in the quality of staff should be the professional experience (3 - 5 years). Another criterion about the teaching / training staff is to differentiate among the staff involved in the post-secondary programs to those in the secondary programs be it in terms of qualifications (non-necessarily academic) and the remuneration.

Permeability of the system
The integration of a credit system in upper secondary education would increase the opportunities for permeability. Moreover, adopting the ECTS system in the post-secondary programs delivered by the VET providers would ease the horizontal mobility towards academic post-secondary programs (not only within the country but also internationally. The Erasmus program now has included in its ICM (international credit mobility) instrument not only the mobility of students for studies but also for internships and apprenticeships, providing the opportunity for post-secondary students to engage in exchange programs.

Quality Assurance
It would be sensible to apply the same quality assessment standards, since the intended learning outcomes are the same across the post-secondary programs, regardless if delivered by HEIs or VET providers. The same applies for the quality assessment and standards for work-based learning.

Assessment of VET trainers
In addition to periodically assessing their staff, VET providers should be proactive in mobilizing qualification opportunities for their staff, like becoming part of projects that focus on capacity building and raining of trainers. The Erasmus project, besides the focus on higher education and youth (CBHE and CBY respectively) has dedicated instruments for VET and can serve as an excellent platform to tap into.

Quality Assurance
All VET providers should have effective feedback loops developed and business partners should be part of internal quality assurance bodies and actively involved in self-assessment mechanisms for post-secondary programs.

Responsiveness to market needs
Businesses should provide clear and direct inputs and feedback to the providers, keeping in mind not only the current but also the eventual future needs of the labor market.

Quality Assurance
While this might imply costs for the businesses, the quality of the post-secondary programs has a direct impact on the skills of their future employees, therefore businesses should actively contribute to assess and validate post-secondary programs.

Follow European development. The European Commission published a working document "Putting into practice the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships – implementation of the Council Recommendation by Member States. It includes 14 criteria for quality and effective apprenticeships (7 for Framework conditions, and 7 for Learning and working conditions). Neighbour Montenegro is the first country in the Western Balkans to nationally roll-out Dual VET. It applies the building blocks for quality apprenticeship (https://www.ilo.org/budapest/whats-new/WCMS_740890/lang-en/index.htm).

Long term interventions

Increasing the share of in-company training in the post-secondary VET curriculum is of great importance, hence gradual restructuring of the current study programs according to the dual education model is recommended.

Besides working to improve the profile of post-secondary VET as such, government may also promote lifelong learning. National educational and economic policies should highlight the need for lifelong learning and ease adult participation in learning which in Albania is underdeveloped.

Inclusivity must be improved and VET should cater for students with disabilities too. Concrete measures to reinforce inclusivity must be developed and implemented from the policymakers.

Post-secondary VET education should aspire to develop work-based learning, to develop specific skills and learn generic employability skills. Post-secondary VET should be identifiable, have a clear added value over upper-secondary VET, and be known as education for practical skills – thus different from a Bachelor's education.

Educational institutions should cooperate much better with employers to ensuring that student is taught the right practical skills and achieve the right qualifications. Cooperation and coordination take place at different levels – from national level meetings in the National Labour Council to the cooperation between a single educational institution and an enterprise or organization.

Develop a cooperative and open mindset to actively and meaningfully engage with the education providers. After all, better skilled graduates are at the best interest of the entire market. The risk of employees leaving once trained, while cannot be entirely mitigated, can be regulated by contracts.

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Urdher për miratimin e rregullores “Për zbatimin e praktikave profesionale në biznes në kuadër të ndjekjes së programeve të AFP-së në institucionet publike të arsimit dhe formimit profesional”. 2020.

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