Learning and teaching space in higher education

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Exploration of Policy and Practice: Learning and Teaching Space in Kosovo Higher Education

“National Report” by AAB College about policy and practice of designing L&T spaces in Kosovo higher education including institutional levels

also includes a brief exploration of policy of designing learning and teaching spaces in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia

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Executive Summary

Introduction to the report: up to two pages summarising key findings.

Teaching and learning spaces have been one of the key elements of performance in higher education in Kosovo and in the region of the Western Balkans. With the fast technology advances, teaching and learning spaces as the key component of the learning environment have been going through tremendous changes in the last several decades. The changes have been so far-reaching, in particular due to the growing application of online learning, that the very concept of teaching and learning spaces is acquiring new features fast. The new socio-economic situation after the conflicts in the Balkans, the young population and the low opportunity for employment have resulted in the opening of new institutions of higher education in Kosovo and in the region. For the accommodation of new universities and colleges, in addition to the rehabilitation of existing capacities, the construction of new university buildings and campuses, whether public or private, has been necessary. Unfortunately, in the region there was neither a proper legal basis nor the relevant norms on which the architects would have relied.

The overall goal of the Learning and Teaching Spaces in Higher Education (LTSHE) project is to develop a set of core principles that institutions can use to help them design, construct and develop new learning and teaching spaces. Increasingly, quality assurance in higher education is expanding to include a wide range of aspects of university life that includes buildings and the environment. This project would provide a framework for institutions to ensure that they make best use of their resources.

The first intellectual output of this project explores policy and practice of learning and teaching spaces in higher education institutions in the countries partnering in LTSHE project. This output aims to be set out national reports and a summary report identifying national policy and practice relating to the construction and development of learning and teaching space in higher education. The task was to gather and analyse data relating to policy and practice at national level. The Kosovo report also expanded to research policy in three other countries in the Western Balkans.

To accomplish the task 1, AAB College research team looked into policies regarding teaching and learning spaces in higher education in four countries in the Western Balkan region, narrowing its focus more particularly on the practices related to LTSHE in Kosovo. The research consisted of two main components: the desk research and the empirical research. The desk research part looked more closely into the legal and policy framework in four countries in the region: Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia (in alphabetical order). This part of the research found that there is a lack of specific standards and norms that would regulation planning, design and construction of higher education institution facilities. The laws and bylaws refer at a very general level to the requirements for teaching and learning spaces in higher education institutions. More specific standards in all four countries of the region can be found in the accreditation bylaws and regulations issued by accreditation agencies. Most commonly, these regulations serve for external evaluation and accreditation purposes, but fall short of meaningful follow-up and monitoring processes for improved quality in higher education provision. In most cases, post-accreditation monitoring and support are in the early stages of planning or regulation.

The situation with the COVID-19 pandemic showed that while there are regulations and practical efforts invested in new technologies and digitization of administration in higher education, there is still significant lack of provisions addressing online and distance learning as components of learning environment. The COVID-
19 pandemic caught most of the higher education institutions in Kosovo unprepared for a meaningful implementation of online learning when a lock-out was imposed by the Government in March 2020.

Each of the four analysed countries have their strengths, but also weaknesses. Weaknesses mainly refer to the lack of provisions in the field of digitization and online learning in higher education. While a lot is done in the field of digitization of administration and library services, institutions in these countries still fall short of digitization of teaching and learning, including in particular distance and online learning provision.

The second part of the research consisted of looking into institutional practices with teaching and learning spaces in higher education. To identify and more specifically analyse the translation of policies into practices, the scope of the research narrowed geographically down to the case of Kosovo. The team studied more closely the strategic planning documents and practices of their implementation in five public universities in Kosovo and one non-public higher education institution. Thematically, the research focused on access to teaching and learning spaces, relations with the curricula, digitization of the learning environment, aesthetical aspects, efficiency of T&L spaces and the role of the institutions in the community life. Institutional strategic documents, regulations and implementation practices show that there is not a systematic and strategic approach to teaching and learning spaces in most of the institutions of higher education in Kosovo.
1. Introduction to the national context

Key developments in Kosovo higher education affecting teaching and learning spaces

Brief background

Kosovo higher education came out in ruins after the war of 1999. For almost a decade (1991-1999), students and teaching staff of the University of Pristina (the then only higher education institution in Kosovo) worked and studied in private facilities. This 'parallel system'\(^1\) was organized in response to the then Serbian regime ousting Albanian majority students and teaching staff from the public university premises. Higher education students were not alone in this: over 300,000 students and teaching staff in all levels of education organized instruction with salaries and premises provided by the people and the parallel government of Kosovo in exile\(^2\).

The premises were generously provided to the University of Pristina with instruction in Albanian by the residents of Pristina and other cities that housed campuses and branches of the University.

These were usually private homes or small stores that were slightly remade to serve as classrooms and sometimes university administration offices. Usually, long wooden boards would be placed on plastic or metal boxes to serve as seats and a black board would hang on the wall to make a classroom where instruction would take place with students squeezing in a commonly small room. The store or the room would usually look to the street with easy access to enter and exit the classroom. Often the Serbian police would be patrolling the streets and harassing students and the teaching staff for studying under the parallel system of Kosovan education. One can imagine the quality of instruction that took place in such physical and psychological conditions for both students and staff. Even two decades later, the system does not appear to have overcome the legacies of the difficult nineties and the war of 1999.

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\(^1\) Due to the rejection of the new way of education and studies in the 'home-school' by the Serbian government, this way of teaching has been called 'parallel system'.

\(^2\) Only primary school students and teaching staff were allowed to learn in the public schools. However, the primary school teachers did not receive their salaries from the Serbian state budget (which by the way collected all taxes from the population in Kosovo).
Key features of the higher education system in Kosovo in the last two decades

After the war of 1999, Kosovo was placed under a United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) based on UN Resolution 1244. This meant that during a period of three years Kosovo education was administered jointly by the international and local administration, with the international officers keeping all decision-making powers. One of the ramifications of this arrangement was that Kosovo was among the first countries in the Western Balkans that had a relatively advanced law (ref ...) on higher education that clearly upheld all principles and dimensions of the Bologna Process as early as 2002. The international administration started a massive reconstruction process in the war-torn Kosovo, whereby hundreds of schools were rebuilt or renovated. However, the same does not apply to the University of Pristina since its facilities in Pristina and in other major towns were destroyed by the war. As a result, with few exceptions (such as new buildings of the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Economy) only minor renovations were carried out in the University buildings in the Pristina campuses during the two decades. For illustration, the physical premises of the Faculty of Philology and the Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Sciences are the same or even worse off nowadays than they were twenty years ago. On the other hand, there has been some investment in laboratories that partially counterweighs the outdated facilities.

Institutional proliferation:

The story is somewhat different in the former branches of the University of Pristsina in other major cities of Kosovo. Between 2010 and 2014 six former branches of the University of Pristina (mainly branches of education and technical faculties) turned into standalone universities as part of a spell of politically motivated generosity to the regional centres of political power for the sake of earning electoral votes in return. These universities are still suffering from the lack of adequate support in finances and human resources. Three of them lost their accreditation in 2019 due to severe shortcomings in quality assurance, regulations, human resources and physical facilities. Three out of six new universities (Gjilan, Prizren, and Gjakova) are still

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3 Other countries in the region passed similar laws between five and ten years later.
4 In the six bigger towns of Kosovo: Prizren, Peja, Gjakova, Gjilan, Mitrovica, and Ferizaj. Most of these universities are relatively small teaching higher education institutions with dozens of teaching staff and a couple of thousand students (University of Gjakova, University of Mitrovica, University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj and the University of Gjilan). The two exceptions are the Universities in Peja and Prizren with over ten thousand students (but still with a very limited number of teaching staff). None of these institutions engage in any meaningful research or doctoral programmes.
5 Most of these higher education institutions still do not meet the basic criteria of being a university
6 They are undergoing external assessment for re-accreditation in 2020.
operating in the same premises as when they were functioning as much smaller branches of the University of Pristina, waiting for the Government to keep its promises for new facilities.

*Figure 3: Between old and new - Rector’s Office of the University “Fehmi Agani” in Gjakova*

![Figure 3: Between old and new - Rector’s Office of the University “Fehmi Agani” in Gjakova](image)

*Source: University of Gjakova*

*Figure 4: University of Prizren in the old campus of the Higher Pedagogical School, between old and new*

![Figure 4: University of Prizren in the old campus of the Higher Pedagogical School, between old and new](image)

*Source: University of Prizren*

On the other hand, the other three universities that were established between 2010 and 2016 (University of Mitrovica, University of Peja, and the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj), have been able to move to new campuses.
The new universities fall short of a full-fledged university in many respects. The key shortfall is the lack of institutional autonomy. Unlike the University of Pristina, which gained full operational autonomy from the Ministry of Education and Science in 2012, the new Universities have to refer to the ministry for final approval for all categories of spending, including salaries, goods and services and capital investment. Lack of institutional autonomy, coupled with notorious underfunding from public sources and missing any other sources of financing, makes it all but a mission impossible for these institutions to survive in the higher
education arena in Kosovo. In this arena, they are competing for students, funds and research projects with the consolidated University of Pristina and the relatively well developed (and more motivated) private sector in higher education.

**Massification:**

The first higher education institution in Kosovo, a teacher training college, was established in 1959. Today, there are already seven public universities and 25 private higher education institutions offering 418 different programs in three cycles. During the nineties of the last century, part of the population missed the opportunity to benefit from higher education in Kosovo due to the conditions of occupation and segregation by the then Serbian regime. At the same time, during the post-war period, with an average of 35 %, Kosovo population showed the highest levels of unemployment in Europe. According to data made available by the Kosovo Statistics Agency (KSA 2012) "a significant share of the youth population, aged 15-24 is unemployed (55,3%) and the share of female population in that category is higher (63.8%) than that of male population (52.0%)". In 2012, 126.200 young people in Kosovo, aged from 15 to 24, were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and they represented more than 35,1% of the young population. On the other hand, research showed that graduates from higher education had the best odds for employment in Kosovo. Unemployment is highest for people who have no education (62,5% of this group are unemployed) and lowest for people who had completed tertiary education (15,6%). (KSA 2012). Therefore, unemployed youth and adults saw an opportunity for improving their employment odds by enrolling studies in higher education – which were provided for free in public higher education institutions.

A study (Rexhaj X., 2015) found that only between academic years in 2008 and 2013 the number of students at the University of Pristina more than doubled from 25,840 to over 54,000 students (see the table below). The table below shows the increasing student numbers and its impact on the financing of higher education and on the quality of instruction, as reflected in increased student to teacher ratio. The increased student participation was not followed up by a similar increase in teaching staff numbers and, as a result, the student to teacher ratio went up from 24.5 in 2008 to 52.8 students to one teaching staff in 2013. The situation only deteriorated in the coming years since most PhD programmes stopped being implemented in 2006 through a decision of the rector’s office. Later (from 2009) the Agency of Accreditation applied a strict approach to starting new PhD programmes requiring that higher education institutions provide nothing less than European standards to start a PhD programme. With the bar set too high there were few new graduates from third cycle programmes until a decade later when dozens and hundreds of future scholars started studying abroad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>Full time staff</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>Budget / mil €</th>
<th>Teacher-Student Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>1,023</td>
<td>54,066</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>1,023</td>
<td>47,070</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>41,833</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>1,051</td>
<td>25,840</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rexhaj, Pupovci; Access to Higher Education in Kosovo, 2015

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7 Starting from the academic year 2014 / 2015 new universities started separating from the University of Pristina. This was reflected also in the decreasing student numbers. In 2020, there are around 40,000 students studying at the university of Pristina in all three cycles.
Of course, this trend also had a negative impact on the availability and utilization of teaching and learning spaces at the University of Pristina. Students were usually crammed in dozens and even hundreds in large theatres with little to no opportunity for quality instruction or interaction with teachers and colleagues. For illustration, in 2008, the Faculty of Economy of the University of Pristina had only eight classrooms and theatres to organize instruction for its 11,000 students (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2012). One can only imagine that this situation did not allow for any spaces for small group activities, personalized spaces, labs, common areas and so on. To conclude, increased student numbers had a negative impact on the quality of instruction and educational provision in the University of Pristina, including from the perspective of teaching and learning spaces.

Increased interest of the population for higher education services had another significant implication in institutional proliferation in higher education. The trend was further strengthened between 2010 and 2013, when the Government established five new public universities: the University of Prizren (2010), the University of Peja (2012), the University of Gjakova (2013), the University of Gjilan (2013) and the University of Mitrovica (2013). In 2016, the government turned another faculty of the University of Pristina into the new University of Applied Studies in Ferizaj. Most of these were established in the former branches of the Faculty of Education of the University of Prishtina (Prizren, Gjakova, Gjilan) or in former faculties of applied sciences (former Business School in Peja, the former Higher Technical School for Wood Processing in Ferizaj, and the Faculty of Metallurgy in Mitrovica).

Despite new institutions and increased enrolment, the public sector in higher education could not meet the popular interest to study in higher education. As a result, starting as early as 2003, private higher education institutions started emerging to fill the gap in provision. They have been providing relatively inexpensive studies (around € 1000) per academic year, both at the bachelor and master levels. The number of private HE providers increased from six in 2004 to 25 in 2018 (Kosovo Accreditation Agency, 2019). With few exceptions, private HEIs operated in rented facilities, which were most commonly housing or office facilities turned into education premises. Originally thought for another destination, often these premises did not provide even basic conditions for the teaching and learning process. In the recent years (after 2015) few private higher education providers built new campuses designed to the purpose. AAB College, UBT College, Fama College, and Dardania colleges operate in their own premises.

However, only AAB College built its premises to destination, that is for teaching and learning in higher education. In recent years, UBT College constructed a new modern campus outside of the city of Pristina boundaries. The Fama private college did the same in 2012, but it appears that the students were not interested to move to the new campus out of town and the premises remain unutilized to this day (See Fama College Image below). Another reason for the lack of more meaningful investment in buildings by the private institutions appears to rest in the fact that the number of potential students is decreasing significantly from one year to another. In conclusion, the majority of the private providers still continue offering their services in rented premises, originally built for some other destination, which do not meet the basic requirements for teaching and learning.

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8 In many cases it is more expensive to send the child to day-care institutions at around € 1500 per year than to cover for university tuition in Kosovo).
9 These cases will be presented further in the report.
Funding in Kosovo higher education:

Another key aspect of higher education in Kosovo in the post-war period has been the constant lack of adequate funding. To this day, over two thirds of funding in higher education institutions goes to covering for teaching activities (Ministry of Finance, 2019). As a result, Kosovo universities have turned by and large into teaching colleges, whereby the same staff teaches in two, three or more institutions at the same time. This situation has left little to no funds for investing in the improvement of teaching and learning spaces. The Kosovo budget for 2019 shows that public higher education institutions are allocated between 10 and 30% of the total budget for capital investment (in Kosovo this implies construction of new buildings). For instance, out of €34 million budgeted for the University of Pristina, over €21 million are earmarked for salaries and per-diems, €3.4 million for goods and services (most of which is spent for staff overtime work and membership to various committees), €1.1 million for communal services, €1.4 million for student stipends, and €7.5 million for capital expenditure (which in Kosovo implies exclusively new construction or renovations). With more than two thirds of the budget going to salaries, about one fourth in new construction, and about 10% on stipends and communal services, only meagre funds remain for improving teaching and learning spaces, staff development and capacity building, new technologies, research projects, and teaching and learning materials. The situation is even worse in other public universities. The University of Prizren had just over €2.8 million allocated for the 2019 budget year. Of these €1.6 million was spent for salaries, €0.6 million for goods and services (read for overtime and committees) and only less than 10% for capital investment. This means that over 85% of the budget allocations are spent for staff salaries and per-diems. As a result, university provision in Kosovo has come down to bare classrooms and hallways in which basic teaching services are provided to students.

Another element substantiating the argument of the lack of funding is the per student annual spending ratio for the public universities in Kosovo. This ratio varies from one university to another. In 2019, the University
of Pristina was allocated close to € 1000 per student (€ 34 million for around 35,000 students), which is way more than the € 337.5 for the University of Peja (€ 3.6 million for 10,750 students) or the University of Prizren with slightly over € 500 (€2.6 million for 5,553 students). First of all, one can notice a significant discrepancy in the level of financing between the University of Peja (with € 337 per student) and the University of Pristina (with nearly € 1,000 per student).

The funding discrimination and underfunding of most universities is also reflected in the participation of capital investment in the overall budget. Thus, the University of Prizren was allocated less than 10 % for capital investment in 2019, compared to over 25 % for the University of Pristina and around 28 % for the University of Peja. This is confirmed by the staff to student ratio indicator that is used for budget allocations. The Budget Law for 2019 in the Republic of Kosovo shows that the University of Pristina has 2081 staff members (teaching and admin) providing services to around 40 thousand students, which gives an average of 20 students to one staff member. This is in stark contrast to the situation in the University of Prizren with an average of 37.7 students and the University of Peja with a staggering 66.3 students to a staff member. The situation is in fact even more dismal if data were calculated only based on teaching staff to student numbers. However, such disaggregated data are not made available by the national statistics office or by the Ministry of Education and Science higher education information management system (HEMIS).

Financing of private higher education institutions: Similar data on funding are not available for the private higher education institutions. In general, one third of the student population in Kosovo higher education attends studies in one of the private higher education providers. According to the data by the Kosovo Statistics Office (Kosovo Statistics Agency, 2019) there are slightly over 104,000 students in Kosovo higher education, with 36,000 students attending education in private higher education providers.

The funding levels can be estimated approximately based on the fees students pay for tuition, but it is not possible to calculate how much of the generated income goes back to providing education services. This is the result of the institutional and financial autonomy that private higher education providers (PHEP) are provided by the Law on Higher Education and of the lack of transparency on their part. Nevertheless, a ballpark calculation is possible based on the student numbers and the student fees for every institution that reports these data to authorities. The large majority of students in PHEP pay between € 800 and € 1200 per year for both bachelor and master studies. A smaller number, less than 5 % of students in the private sector (such as students of the American University of Kosovo and students of medical study programmes in other PHEP-s), pay between € 2000 and € 8000 per academic year for tuition fees. Most of the PHEP-s in Kosovo operate based solely on the income collected from tuition fees. The law does not provide any ruling that would require PHEP-s to return all or most of their income back to students and staff in the form of education services or research activities. More concrete requirements regarding teaching and learning spaces and technologies were applied only starting 2019 with the new Accreditation Guidelines (Kosovo Accreditation Agency, 2018).

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10 Unfortunately, any data provided in Kosovo need to be taken with reservations and verified before using. For illustration, the Law on Budget sheets give a total number of 2081 staff members at the University of Pristina. On the other hand, data of the Kosovo Statistics Agency (2019, p. 91) gives a figure of 1382 staff members at the UPI! In this report we used the Budget figure (2019, pp. sheet 22-57), since that figure was the basis that served for the calculation of the budget.

The research on teaching and learning spaces in Kosovo higher education took place in the wider context of COVID–19 pandemic, which made all activities and efforts become difficult to manage and carry out. The research consisted mainly of desk research, coupled with few field visits and several brief interviews.

At the level of national policies and legal framework, the research analysed legal documents, policies, and academic articles relevant to teaching and learning (T&L) spaces and equipment in higher education in four countries of the Western Balkans: Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Apart from T&L spaces and equipment, the study also looked at the digitization processes and online learning as another segment in higher education that saw significant augmentation in importance during the recent (January – July 2019) COVID–19 Pandemic. During the desk research, the key legal documents (national laws on higher education) were analysed, together with bylaws, policies and strategic plans.

As was found during the research process, critical regarding the study of the teaching and learning spaces in the four countries appeared to be the national accreditation standards and guidelines, which were analysed in more detail. Besides accreditation standards and norms, in Kosovo it was important to further elaborate the Ministry of Education and Science accreditation bylaws, which was not the case to such extent in the legislation of the other three countries. Besides, the analysis also looked into the national strategic planning documents in education to see the level of implementation and importance attached to teaching and learning spaces by the national authorities.

At the institutional level, the desk research was narrowed to focus on Kosovo higher education institutions (HEI-s). This part was dedicated to analysing strategic planning documents and decisions by the management of the higher education institutions. According to the Law on Higher Education (2011, pp. Art.18,20,21,22,23) and accreditation guidelines (Kosovo Accreditation Agency, 2018), all HEI-s in Kosovo must develop, approve and regularly review their institutional strategic development plans and sometimes also separate operational plans for various segments (such as science, cooperation, quality assurance and so on).

A number of academic articles have been analysed for the purpose of this research, mainly related to the general state of the higher education in respective countries. Albeit that academic articles referring specifically to the teaching and learning spaces are quite rare, in particular in Kosovo.

During the research, several field trips were organized, mostly to the divided town of Mitrovica in the north part of Kosovo, but not only. The trips were aimed at gaining a fuller picture about the university campus of the University of Mitrovica and its role and interaction with the local administration and population. Other trips were organized to towns of Ferizaj, Gjilan, Peja, and Prizren.

In Mitrovica, the field research narrowed down to focus on the University of Mitrovica (South) premises for a more detailed description of the external and internal arrangements of the learning spaces. The purpose was to depict various aspects of the T&L spaces such as diversity, access, aesthetics, meeting of curricular needs, matching massification needs and so on. Another important, albeit originally unplanned, aspect of the

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12 After the intervention of NATO forces in Kosovo and Serbia and the end of the armed conflict, in Kosovo there was a migration of the Serb population to some centers such as Gracanica, Shterpce, Zubin Potok, etc. At the same time, there was an influx from one side to the other, as is the case of Mitrovica, where the northern part of the city, across the Iber River, is populated mainly by Serbs.
research was to look into the way teaching and learning spaces were used or served to face the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. How were the spaces used, what was the role of technology, how did the staff manage the new learning conditions and (online) environment and so on, were some of the themes that pushed themselves into the research scheme.

During the research and field trips, a number of interviews were carried out with persons responsible for policymaking in central authorities and institutional management, and in particular with architects of the university campuses. Key questions to architects were:

The questions addressed to the university management/teaching staff included the following:

1. To what extent do the T&L spaces in their institution facilitate communication and interaction with students?
2. How should the T&L spaces be improved to better serve the academic goals of HEI-s?
3. What were the key challenges the COVID – 19 pandemic brought to the communication and interaction with students?

The questions referred mainly to the way they managed to achieve coherence between curricula and teaching and learning spaces. They were also asked about efficiency in using resources, aesthetical aspects, and dealing with demands coming from management and administration. Another set of questions referred to the interference and changing demands by the institutional management. In total, six persons were interviewed during the research. Their feedback proved valuable for gaining better insight into the research enquiries, but also in identifying ways to improve the situation.
3. National Policies on LTSHE in the Western Balkans

Document analysis

In this section of the report are briefly analysed and presented key policy documents in the field of teaching and learning spaces in Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania. The purpose of this approach is to provide a brief overview of the respective trends in the region of Western Balkans. It is worth pointing out that there is insufficient information available in the laws regarding teaching and learning spaces in higher education and that there is an obvious lack of standards and norms specifically regulating construction and/or furnishing of higher education teaching and learning spaces in the countries in the region. It appears that when designing new higher education facilities architects usually refer to general national and international standards of construction and then it remains to their discretion to adapt these general standards to the needs of a higher education institution and community. According to the Head of Infrastructure Department at the Kosovo Ministry of Education and Science, Kosovo uses general architectural Neufert standards from Germany and the former Yugoslav standards JUS. As pointed out by the interviewed architects, education authorities and owners of private higher education institutions broadly refer to the need to meet the key requirements for education, science and technology due to the lack of more specific regulations and guidelines for the construction of university campuses or buildings in higher education.

The key legal and policy instruments that specifically address higher education standards for T&L spaces in the countries in the region are the quality assurance policies and regulations and they will be analysed in more detail in this report. Further in this section will be analysed legal and policy documents in a hierarchic order starting from laws/bylaws to continue with standards/guidelines and ending with national strategic plans. In parallel with these, wherever applicable, academic articles are analysed that tackle the issue of T&L spaces in the higher education in the region. The analysis of policy documents is structured by country – Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia.

One of the findings is that each of the four analysed countries have their strengths, but also weaknesses. Weaknesses mainly refer to the lack of provisions in the field of digitization and online learning in higher education. While a lot is done in the field of digitization (primarily of administration and library services), the legal frameworks in these countries lack clear provisions on online learning. Very recent history with COVID 19 pandemic provided all countries and institutions with an important lesson in this regard. From trendy words, online and distance learning, digitization, new technologies have turned into basic forms of provision of educational services in higher education as a result of the Pandemic.

On the other hand, there are also strengths in each country that could serve as good models and practices to exchange between the national authorities and higher education institutions. For instance, Albanian legal framework provides for a student-centred and student friendly approach in regulating learning environment; Serbia provides specific and clear standards for T&L spaces for various curricular fields and study programs; Kosovo has concrete standards and guidelines for physical infrastructure in HE; North Macedonia has a very consolidated system of authorities put in place according to the new Law and is now expected to approve new accreditation regulations that will provide also for teaching and learning spaces.

13 https://www.academia.edu/21246356/Ernst_Neufert_ARCHITECTS_DATA
14 According to interviewed architects, the other countries in the Western Balkans, in particular former Yugoslav republics, are based on Jus standards, too.
15 in alphabetic order
Albania

The Law on Higher Education

The Law on Higher Education and Research in the Republic of Albania (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015) regulates all aspects of higher education in the Republic of Albania, including higher education institutions, quality assurance, student issues, research, financing, governance and so on. The Law does not specifically regulate teaching and learning spaces or digitization of educational services. However, it provides (Articles 103-106) for the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) as the authority responsible for setting standards and for managing accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes.

The Code of Quality in Higher Education

However, it is the Council of Ministers (the Government) of Albania that approved the Code of Quality in Higher Education (Council of Ministers, 2018), which is a set of documents presenting the standards and criteria for institutional and program accreditation at bachelor and master level (both general and professional education) in higher education in Albania. As a rule, the Code provides five sets of standards (structure of studies, curricula, teaching and assessment, resources, and student issues) and a respective number of criteria regulating institutional and program accreditation in both study cycles. A separate set of standards (4. Resources for implementation of study programmes and for student support) is dedicated to providing optimum conditions for study and work. Learning environment and physical infrastructure are duly addressed in the Code and apply a student centered approach and thinking. They address key aspects relevant for student learning, such as physical and didactic infrastructure (Standard III.2), teaching facilities and infrastructure in line with the study program mission, nature and character (Standard IV.2), an adequate learning environment, library and financial support for students (Standard IV.3), and last but not least, Standard V.5 that provides for an enabling environment “The institution has special procedures and units for welcoming, orientation, and counseling of students, as well as for management of complaints and problems, which operate permanently and are easily accessible and usable by students.” (2018, p. 9219) Even though these standards remain halfway of providing clear and measurable criteria for the teaching and learning spaces (as is the case of the Republic of Serbia), they still present a very affirmative approach to creating a supportive and enabling learning environment for students and staff.

Regarding online learning and digitization, a search of terms and concepts in the field (terms: online, virtual, distance, information, informatics, digital) produced only twelve results when the term informatic (10 times) and digital (2 times) were used in a relatively long document as the Code is. The way they are conceived in the Code, new technologies are used to enhance teaching conditions, administration services, library services and communication with students, albeit staying short of any forms of online learning and interaction. For illustration, Standard III.3, Criterion 4. of the Code of Quality (2018, p. 9226) states that “The management system has integrated platforms and modules that allow for interactive forms of communication and exchange of information between staff and students.”

In conclusion, apart from relative lack of specific provisions regulating digitization and online learning, Albania provides a solid legal framework for a supportive learning environment in higher education institutions in Albania.
Higher education strategic planning

Our research did not result successful in identifying an effective national strategic plan for higher education in Albania. The most recent document addressing planning of development of higher education in Albania is a white paper from 2014 (Commission on Higher Education and Research, 2014). This document looks into key issues and trends in higher education and science and proposes main directions for their development. The teaching and learning spaces are seen primarily as an issue that needs to be addressed for improvement due to numerous shortcomings. For illustration, the report states that “Almost all key elements of teaching, research, teaching and learning spaces and laboratories, libraries, literature and academic publications show shortcomings as a result of the lack of sufficient financing. (2014, p. 35)” The white paper does not directly address the issues of teaching and learning spaces, online learning, digitization and application of new technologies in higher education.

In conclusion, the accreditation documents in Albania are the key address for anyone interested to learn about the policies and regulations in the field of teaching and learning spaces and application of new technologies in higher education in Albania.

Kosovo:

Key institutions responsible for planning and development of higher education in Kosovo are the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA). According to the Law on Higher Education, MES is responsible for designing policies and legal provisions, whereas KAA is responsible for carrying out external evaluation, accreditation and monitoring of higher education institutions, with the purpose of making sure that quality assurance standards and criteria are met and adhered to. The KAA State Quality Council also designs and approves the standards and guidelines for accreditation of institutions and programs. The National Qualifications Authority is responsible for accrediting vocational study programs (levels 4, 5, and 6) based on provisions of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Higher education institutions (briefly presented in the introduction) are autonomous entities responsible to deliver higher educational and research services.

There is a range of regulations approved in Kosovo by the Ministry of Education and Science that provide for the design, construction and maintenance of school buildings. During the research, the following documents were found on the Ministry website:

- Guidelines for maintenance of school facilities 2019 (Ministry of Education and Science, 2019)

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16 According to an international consultant engaged in the process, Albania is currently developing its sector strategy for education to be ready by end of 2020.
17 The Kosovo NQF has eight levels of qualifications and is fully in line with the European Qualifications Framework.
These guidelines provide general and specific provisions for designing pre-school facilities and school buildings. They serve as basic points of reference for planning and construction and even review of school facilities. However, there are no such regulations in place for the higher education facilities. In the case of higher education facilities, architects and engineers are based on German Neufert standards and former Yugoslav JUS standards in architecture. After that they apply their experience, skills and research they carry out when designing higher education facilities. There have been several occasions when new facilities had to be designed in Kosovo in the last two decades. The research team has interviewed and consulted three teams of architects who designed or engaged in preparations for three different facilities: (i) Faculty of Education of the University of Pristina (designed 2005 and construction completed 2007); (ii) University campus and the main building of the University of Mitrovica (2013); and (iii) University campus and the main building at the University of Peja.

The Faculty of Education in Pristina was prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science team of architects and engineers of the Infrastructure Department. During the interview, they said that they prepared the requirements for the design team during 2004 and 2005 together with collecting all licences, building permits, technical specifications and so on. Lacking concrete documents, they said that they engaged in an intensive process of communication with the leadership of the Faculty of Education, with the Head of Ministry Higher Education Department, and with the Municipality of Pristina (who were responsible for permits). They added that they took the building of the Faculty of Education of the University of Calgary, Canada, as a model. The result was a very clear task for the team of architects who developed the building architectural design and finally, after two years, a beautiful and functional building in the University campus, downtown Pristina since 2007. Students of the Faculty of Education keep providing very positive feedback on the infrastructure at the Faculty during the student evaluations that take place at the end of every semester.

The team responsible for the University campus of the University of Mitrovica told the interviewers that they consulted local and international guidelines and literature as well as visited various university campuses in Austria in 2013. The result of their efforts has been one of the most beautiful university campuses in Kosovo and in the region. The campus is still under construction with three buildings completed (rector’s office and two buildings with theatres, labs, and teachers’ cabinets) and the student dormitories and the students’ restaurant and canteen under construction (due end of 2020).

The teaching and learning spaces in higher education are regulated differently with regard to various higher education institutions, depending on the level of their financial autonomy. For instance, the University of Pristina enjoys full institutional and financial autonomy from the Ministry of Education and Science and is free to plan and implement even its capital investment projects. At the same time, other new public universities depend on the Ministry to plan for any new construction, reconstruction, or purchase of equipment.
The legal framework regulating higher education in Kosovo in general, and the teaching and learning spaces in particular, includes the following documents:

- The Law on Higher Education (2011)
- The Administrative Instruction 15/2018 ISSUES by MEST
- The Accreditation Guidelines of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency
- Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (KESP) 2017-2021

The Kosovo Law on Higher Education:

This basic law regulates all aspects of higher education in Kosovo. It addresses the issue of teaching and learning spaces in several instances and articles. Whereas Article 8, in paragraphs 4 and 5, only superficially refers to L&T spaces by regulating the renting and generating income from the buildings, it is Article 14 (MEST, 2011), on licensing of private higher education providers, that more specifically regulates the issue of T&L spaces, stating in paragraph 4.1. that a provider will be issued a license if it provides adequate facilities and equipment and if (in paragraph 5.2) it provides “premises and other physical resources which are appropriate to the educational work of the provider, which are safe and fit for purpose and for which the provider has full legal title.” This provision is important since it provides the basis for further elaboration in bylaws of important issues such as appropriateness, purpose, safety, and ownership. Regarding the latter, the Law provides for full ownership of the facilities by the private providers. However, as pointed out in the introduction to this report, most of the private providers do not hold the title to the facilities they operate in.

Administrative instruction (AI) 15/2018 on accreditation in higher education:

Teaching and learning spaces are further addressed in more detail by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) administrative instruction (AI) 15/2018, which is the key legal act regulating accreditation of all higher education providers in Kosovo (MEST, 2018). Teaching and learning spaces are regulated by two main sections of this AI, namely in Article 25 on Quality Standards for Institutional Accreditation and Article 26 on Quality Standards for Program Accreditation. Article 25, in the section on institutional management and mission in paragraph 1.1.5. foresees that the institution “must prove that it has sufficient human, material and financial resources, as well as the technical and physical infrastructure needed for the fulfilment of the goals stated in its Strategic Plan.” Further below it is provided that the Institution should have sufficient ... facilities and equipment (such as computers, labs, etc.) necessary for the proposed programs. Further, in the same Article (Par. 1.2.4.) it is stated that “These resources should be provided and be adequate for the type of educational institution and sufficient for the number of the students foreseen to be enrolled.” Pointing out the adequacy of the facilities and equipment is a clear signal on the requirements posed before the management of HEIs regarding the key features of the teaching and learning spaces. This is closely related to the next paragraph (1.7.5.), providing for student services, which states that “The institution should ensure that current and future students have access to counselling and support services during their studies.” In the context of our study, this should mean that teaching and learning spaces should be such that provide maximum support that enables and increase student performance.

The key provision in the administrative instruction with reference to teaching and learning spaces is paragraph 1.8. (sub-paragraphs 1.8.1. – 1.8.8.), which requires that HEIs meet the following basic requirements for accreditation:

- Adequate physical and technical infrastructure;
- Adequate number of students in line with the capacity of the T&L spaces
- The institution must have full legal title over premises;
- The facilities should have construction permits only for educational activities;

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18 The Ministry of Education and Science is the new term used for what used to be the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology – MEST (2002-2020), or Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation – MESTI (February – May 2020). The new title (MES) has been effective since the setting up of the new Government of Kosovo in May 2020.
- Leasing or renting is allowed only for facilities dedicated for educational activities;
- There should be rich libraries with books for study programs;
- There should be labs, workshops, and other relevant equipment for specific study programs; and
- The institution should make staff rooms and an appropriate working environment available to its staff for their everyday teaching and research activities.

These provisions set the scene for the kind of requirements higher education institutions in Kosovo need to meet for their licensing and accreditation by the national authorities. A closer inspection, however, reveals that these provisions need to be revised in order to include other important aspects of the T&L spaces such as: access for persons with special needs, facilities and equipment for persons with special needs, personalized spaces, attractive arrangements, areas dedicated to free time and leisure activities, sports areas, small group learning areas, technology and spaces for virtual/online learning and so on. These requirements miss to provide for the need for teaching and learning spaces being in line with the curricular principles and teaching and learning concepts of the institution.

Article 26, which sets out standards and requirements for program accreditation presents to a large extent a similar range of requirements as Article 25 on institutional accreditation and as such are not worth repeating. This article, however, makes a few exceptions, as is the case with the student counselling and support services provision (Art. 26. Par. 5.4.3.) which provides that “the HEI should also demonstrate how it meets the needs for (non-academic) leisure time of students.”

Article 27 of the AI 15/2018 on Accreditation of HEIs regulates external evaluation and accreditation procedures for professional higher education programs. This article outlines the specifics of the field of professional studies, besides taking into account all the requirements for accreditation of general study programs. The analysis of this section focused in finding out the relevance this AI attaches to the teaching and learning areas in professional HEIs, but also in companies during work-based learning experiences. Paragraphs 3.2.2. and 3.2.3. already indicate that the concept of teaching and learning space is viewed differently with regards to professional HE as compared to general study programs. In this section, the concept of T&L spaces expands to include practical work within the higher education institution and internships and placements for work-based learning experiences in companies. It points out the need for curricular goals, learning experiences and teaching spaces to be aligned and clearly stated. Paragraphs 3.6.1 - 3.6.4. regulating applied research states that resources and equipment need to be aligned with the applied research objectives outlined in the strategic plans of institutions.

Accreditation manual:

Based on the AI 15/2018, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency developed its accreditation standards and guidelines included in the KAA Accreditation Manual (Kosovo Accreditation Agency, 2018). In more than one way, KAA accreditation standards and guidelines mark one step ahead in setting standards and criteria for the accreditation of institutions and programs, including in the field of design and utilization of teaching and learning spaces. This step forward is featured in the more inclusive policies, in a more human rights-based approach, in promoting a better alignment between teaching and learning spaces and curricula and so on. Similar to the Ministry of Education administrative instruction on accreditation of HE institutions (15/2018), the KAA accreditation manual provides separate standards for institutional accreditation and program accreditation. Each group of standards is then structured in general areas of activity (GAA), eleven GAAs for institutional accreditation and 7 GAAs for program accreditation. Each GAA is then elaborated into a respective number of specific standards and performance indicators. The teaching and learning spaces are provided for in most of the GAAs. For instance, the GAA 9 on Student Administration and Support Services, in its standard 9.12. states that “Opportunities are provided through appropriate facilities and organizational arrangements for extracurricular activities for students. Arrangements are made to organize and encourage student participation in extracurricular activities.” This is further translated (for illustration) into a
performance indicator (9.5) requiring a senior staff member being assigned responsibility for oversight and development of student support services.

However, the T&L spaces are mainly addressed in the twelve standards and seven performance indicators of the GAA 10: Learning Resources and Facilities. This section of standards requires HEIs to provide: sufficient financial resources for T&L (S 10.1), sufficient library resources in Albanian and English (S 10.2), reliable and efficient online databases (S 10.3), adequate facilities for learning resources, including new technologies (S 10.4.), facilities are made available to students and staff beyond normal working hours (S 10.5), an adequate, clean, attractive and well-maintained physical environment of both buildings and grounds, meeting Kosovo health and safety legislation requirements (S 10.7.), facilities and learning resources are made available for staff and students with special needs (S 10.9.), adequate computer equipment is made available to staff and students (S 10.11), and technical support to staff and students using ICT (S 10.12.).

These standards are translated into performance indicators, such as: annual assessment of the adequacy of resources and services; cooperation agreements in the field of library services; the number of teaching, laboratory and research facilities; food service facilities; cultural, sports and other facilities; accommodation facilities and so on.

Similar to identical provisions on teaching and learning spaces (or as termed in Guidelines “infrastructure and resources”) are applied also in the section about program accreditation standards and guidelines. In this section, teaching and learning spaces are mainly dealt with in the GAA 7: infrastructure and resources. In other general areas in the program accreditation section, T&S spaces are tackled intermittently and a systematic approach is lacking throughout general areas of activity (GAA).

There are cases when resources are dealt with within a GAA, as is the case with new technologies in GAA Educational Process Content, performance indicator 4.2. This GAA determines that “Teachers use new IT resources (e-mail, personal web page, topics, bibliographies and other resources in electronic format and communication with students) and auxiliary materials, such as whiteboard, flipchart and video-projector. This requirement works in the direction of providing working conditions in line with technological development.

As was pointed out, KAA accreditation Guidelines are the key document for addressing issues in the field of T&L spaces. However, the strategy applied even in there is deficient of a more systematic and coherent approach. The key issue remains that teaching and learning spaces are not seen as an integral part of the curriculum but as an addendum to the teaching and learning process or, put in other words, as a separate physical space. A more integrated approach with the curriculum as the centrepiece would allow for more efficient utilization of the same spaces. In that case, classrooms and libraries would cease to be the sole areas where instruction and learning take place. This was confirmed by all interviewees who stated that whenever there are new building projects, they are applying a new concept of utilization of teaching and learning spaces, whereby study programmes and curricula gain importance early in the design phase. This integrated approach goes beyond the integration of curricula, by expanding onto the new utilization of common areas, hallways, library premises and even outdoor areas as learning areas - theatres.

However, currently this is not the case with existing facilities. Apart from this, there is a clear lack of a more modern and innovative approach to new technologies and their application in the teaching/learning and research processes. The accreditation manual refers only once to online learning (ref. XXX). As has been seen during the COVID-19 pandemic global crisis, teaching and learning spaces and the university staff encountered a situation when they had to switch to online learning. In the newly created situation, most of the higher education institutions had to improvise to adapt to the circumstances instead of having made timely
systematic preparations. The legal framework did not support them in this regard. The accreditation guidelines, despite being of a recent date, do not give due attention to this segment as a form and medium of instruction.

Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021

The Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (KESP) 2017-2021 outlines the vision, mission and strategic objectives for Kosovo education for the planned period. The seven strategic objectives are further broken down into a number respective development measures. The teaching and learning spaces in higher education are addressed within the intervention field of higher education. The strategic objective for this intervention area states that it aspires: “Upgrading the quality and competitiveness of higher education through the promotion of excellence in teaching, scientific research, artistic creation, innovation, and internationalisation.” As can be seen, the strategic objective applies an integrated approach to addressing issues of teaching and learning spaces.

There are 11 expected outcomes foreseen to be accomplished within the intervention area of higher education. One of these outcomes refers specifically to teaching and learning spaces: “7.4. Advance the infrastructure and technology for teaching, research and science as well as artistic work.” The measures foreseen to achieve the set outcomes include: assessment of needs for infrastructure for higher education and research; providing support to improve existing and building new spaces; improving research infrastructure, including five new laboratories; and improvement of lab and research equipment in HE and research institutions. The calculated costs for the implementation of the KESP however do not show an itemised calculation of expenses.

Level of implementation of KESP 2017-2021

The strategic measures foresee mainly investment in labs and in equipment, whereas most of the new universities operate in very limited spaces which are incongruent with their specific academic nature and needs for adequate teaching and research activities. An Annual Assessment Report on the level of implementation of the KESP produced by the MEST in 2018, reports a very low (1.3 out of 5) level of implementation of the measures foreseen in the field of infrastructure in higher education. The table below shows the extent to which expected outcomes were realized in the field of higher education and science during 2017.

Table 2. Implementation of KESP 2017-2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Planned expected outcome</th>
<th>Level of implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The staff – student ratio in HEI-s is at least 1:40</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>There are fully functional staff development mechanisms in place in HEIs</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>There are fully functional quality assurance mechanisms in place</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The infrastructure for teaching and research is enhanced in HEI-s</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Until 2019 HE-EMIS is fully functional by 2019</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen from the table, very few measures were implemented as originally planned. Even measure number 5, claimed to have been completed very well (index 4 on a scale of five units), was found useless by the author of this report since it contains only data on students enrolled in the last three academic years in higher education institutions. Besides, key measures foreseen to tackle staff development and quality assurance mechanisms remain poorly implemented or not implemented at all. Relevant to our study, the HE information system does not provide any data on equipment or teaching and learning spaces. During the first year of implementation of the KESP 2017-2021, there had been only minor activities in the field of infrastructure, that is teaching and learning spaces and resources.

Another study (Dukagjin Pupovci, 2018) carried out by the Kosova Education Centre, on student perceptions of education services and conditions at the University of Pristina, addressed also the issue of teaching and learning spaces at this university. Asked to assess the infrastructure at the University (spaces, internet, computers, projectors, labs, tools, etc.) for quality studies at their faculty/department, students showed partial dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning spaces. The results showed that 29.3% of respondents consider the infrastructure “very good” or “good,” while 31.8% consider it “bad” or “very bad.” Or, put in other words, on a scale of 1-5 (five being excellent), in their answers students opted for 2.93 on average. Based on individual faculties, it became clear that students gave a more positive response in those faculties that benefited from investments in their buildings in recent years. Thus, students of the Faculty of Education gave the highest (3.84 out of five) average responses (a new building was constructed in 2008), whereas students of the Medical (2.44) and Arts (2.33) faculties showed the least satisfaction with the state of their teaching and learning spaces and equipment. Needless to say, the latter faculties have been operating in the same buildings for 50 years. Besides, the specific nature of these study programs (arts and medicine) requires significant investment not only in teaching and learning spaces but also in equipment, laboratories/workshops and in providing conditions for practical work.

On the issue of practical work, the student respondents stated that a significant number (over 50 %) of programs at the University of Pristina, did not include practical work as a required element of the study programs (2018, p. 38). Regarding the quality of implementation of the work-based learning experiences, it is surprising that almost one-third (27.6%) of the respondents, were not aware if practical work was organised during their studies or not! The follow-up focus group discussions to the results of the questionnaire found that: “In three different focus groups, students agreed that practical work during studies is lacking or missing.

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19 This makes it impossible, for instance, to analyse any graduation rates, transition rates, perseverance rates and son on.
Some report elements of practical work during classes, but with much less fieldwork or work in places where students would be exercising their future vocation.” This means that teaching and learning spaces are viewed very narrowly by higher education institutions in Kosovo, largely to completely exclude the concept of out of campus learning.

The same study looked into student perceptions about the level of utilization of up-to-date literature at the University of Pristina. It was found that over 80 % of the teaching staff insist on literature only in Albanian language (usually books published by the course professor), with around 20 % offering a mix of English and Albanian literature and only 7 % offering only English literature. On the other hand, when asked about the availability of additional resources (such as scientific articles from internet, translated materials or adapted literature) student respondents stated that over 80 % of the teachers never provide any additional literature or resources. This may imply that teachers insist on disseminating (read selling) their books to the students as the sole source of information.

In 2019, the Kosovo Education and Employment Network (KEEN) project, funded by the European Commission, carried out a mid-term review (Kosovo Education and Employment Network, 2019) of the implementation of the KESP 2017-2021 by the MEST. Regarding the implementation of the measures foreseen for the teaching and learning spaces, the review found that “Limited capital investment took place in teaching and scientific research infrastructure during 2017 and 2018. The main projects are related to the construction of buildings for some faculties and the enlargement of public university campuses. The [original] MEST plan to equip 5 institutions with new labs for learning and scientific research work failed due to budgetary limitations. In addition, no initiatives have been taken to draft plans on maintaining and updating scientific research lab equipment.” (2019, p. 181) The report shows that none of the measures foreseen for infrastructure in the KESP was fully or even partially implemented.

Similar findings are encountered with regard to libraries and reading areas at the University of Pristina by another research21 carried out by the Admovere organisation (Shkelzen Gashi, 2018). The report from this research states that “A considerable number of faculties in the University of Pristina have no libraries, and even the existing libraries are purely furnished. In most of the UP faculties, part of libraries are reading halls as well, and their situation is no better: the number of seats in libraries and reading halls is very limited and working hours are short. None of the libraries of the UP faculties has computers, printers, scanners or copy machine, some of them have no internet access.” This finding is in line with those from other reports which show that teaching and learning spaces at the Kosovo higher education institutions, in particular the public ones, are neglected and seen as of second-hand importance.

This is confirmed when looking at the structure of spending of budgetary and other funds in public institutions. The Law on the Kosovo Budget for 2019 gives a detailed outline of the budgetary allocations for public higher education and research institutions in Kosovo.

Republic of Northern Macedonia

The process of accreditation in the Republic of Northern Macedonia (RNM) is of a relatively recent date. That is why there is still not a set of accreditation policies and guidelines in place. The new Head of the Accreditation Council has been recently (April 2020) appointed and the relevant policies and regulations were in the process

of being drafted and approved by the education authorities at the time when the research for this study was taking place.

The Law on Higher Education in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM)

The legal framework and key mechanisms regulating teaching and learning spaces, equipment and digitization in higher education in the RNM have been approved or set up only in the last two years. The new Law on Higher Education was approved only in 2018 and the bodies responsible for quality assurance only later that year and in 2019. The respective bylaws are still being drafted to be approved and the staffing is still taking place at the time when this report is being written (July 2020). According to the Higher Education Law (Ministry of Education and Science, May 2018), the teaching and learning spaces in the RNM are regulated within the quality assurance process and through the accreditation bylaws. The body responsible for quality assurance in higher education in RNM is the Agency for Quality in Higher Education, consisting of two independent bodies: the Accreditation Board (Section 1, Art. 47) and the Evaluation Board (each consisting of 15 members). The Accreditation Board is responsible to grant or withdraw (institutional and program) accreditation based on recommendations made by the Evaluation Board (Art. 50-53 LHE), which is in turn responsible for carrying out external evaluation and for proposing accreditation procedures and standards. The policies and bylaws regulating standards and norms for external evaluation and accreditation are proposed by the Agency for Quality in Higher Education\(^{22}\) and are approved by the National Council for Higher Education - the body responsible for policy making and quality assurance in higher education and research in the Republic of North Macedonia (art. 41 LHE).

Teaching and learning spaces, equipment and digitization are only dealt with in a few instances in the LHE, namely when providing for student rights (Art. 27., par. 9.3), inclusion (Art. 94.42) and conditions for setting up of HE institutions (Section 2, Art. 61. 2.). These sections only briefly and at a very general level regulate the issues of teaching and learning spaces. For illustration, provision on student rights (Article 27, 9.3.) states that the student “uses the library and databases, space, equipment (teaching aids), software and other scientific and professional infrastructure of the university and its units, ie the independent higher education institution.”

Regulation on Norms and Standards in Higher Education

The regulation for setting up of Higher education institutions and for providing higher education services (No. 51-3990/1) of 2010 issued by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2010) provides the key norms and standards needed to be met by higher education institutions. Together with the need for providing sufficient qualified teaching staff and sustainable financing of higher education institutions, teaching and learning spaces, equipment, library services, and digitization are among the key requirements set out in this regulation (Article 2). Further in this regulation, the standards and norms are elaborated in more detail in articles 4 – 9. The standard for space states that area in square meters (3.5 – 8.5 m\(^2\)) that every higher education institution has to provide corresponding to the nature of studies organized. Article 5 provides for creating the needed working conditions for the academic staff by providing cabinets and personal working areas. The entire Article 7 is dedicated to providing the needed equipment by referring to various international recognised standards (such as ISO) regarding the number of laboratories, the number of computers, equipment, and access to quality internet. Article 8 provides for library services, stating

\(^{22}\) It consists of two independent bodies – boards responsible for accreditation and evaluation respectively: the Board for Accreditation of Higher Education and the Board for External Evaluation in Higher Education.
requiring a sufficient number of physical and electronical copies of books and library resources are available for the students. It also requires direct access to basic and additional literature (both in physical copies and electronic format) needed for the implementation of the set curricula and study programs. The number of physical library items is set at a minimum of 10 of the student body for a given course. Article 9, provides for institutional “website or appropriate electronic application on which are published: study programs; the subject programs; the teaching staff of the higher education institution; schedules for lectures, exercises, seminars, contact classes (consultations); dates for exams, colloquia and other checks; and so on. Given that this is a relatively old regulation (2010), it surprises that it still provides the key elements for quality education even a decade after it was approved.

The Education Strategy 2018 – 2025 (Macedonia, 2018)

Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia in this document states strategic objectives and measures for development of higher education provision and institutions. The strategy does not provide specific objectives on teaching and learning spaces. However, the third strategic priority “Improve Availability and Enrolment System of Higher Education” states the (3.1.) Availability of higher education for those with physical disabilities is improved; and (3.2.) Students are provided with decent accommodation conditions in all dormitories. No other measures specifically refer to teaching and learning spaces, digitization or equipment in higher education. Exceptionally, Measure 5.3 in higher education provides for: “24 laboratories in public universities which are equipped according to the high-technologies requirements are accredited;” (2018, p. 133) For illustration a search of the document using the term “library” produced only one result on introductory pages regarding cataloguing of the publication of the Strategy at the National Library (2018, p. 0).

Republic of Serbia

The Law on Higher Education (Assembly of the Republic of Serbia - MESTD, 2017) of the Republic of Serbia provides for teaching and learning spaces at a very general level when discussing inviolability of academic premises of higher education institutions (Art. 8), standards of accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes (Art. 52), the description of the content of the work permit and requirements for initial accreditation (Art. 52), venues for the organization of studies (Art. 96), venues for student assessment and examination (Art. 105), and the content of the Register of Accredited Institutions (Art. 116).

Facilities and equipment are given due importance in this Law. Article 69 providing for funding of higher education institutions (by the founder) also addresses facilities and equipment. It is worth pointing out that the concept of the founder is not specified with regard to (public or private) ownership. In this way, the Law appears to set a standard across the board regarding the funding of educational and research provision in the country. According to this provision, funds need to be allocated to HEI-s for material expenditure, current and investment maintenance; wages and salaries; equipment; library; scientific research, i.e. artistic work; staff development, including specifically junior staff development; work with talented students; international cooperation; transfer of technology; information management systems; publishing activity; career counselling.

https://www.nat.rs/en/laws/?script=cir the Law on Higher Education in the RS
mechanisms; student activities; equipment and conditions for studies of students with disability; and other purposes.

Seen from the perspective of the structure of financing of higher education institutions, this Law pays due attention to the teaching and learning spaces, making way for further elaboration in bylaws and regulations. One important element of this provision is that it specifically provides that funds will be allocated to HEI-s to address the needs of the students with special educational needs. This implies that the teaching and learning spaces in Serbian HEI-s are designed and adapted to cater to the needs of students who need affirmative action. This directly contributes to a more human rights-based approach in Serbian higher education.

Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia until 2020

This strategic plan of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD, 2012) presents a very comprehensive and systematic approach to addressing key issues in the development of education in the Republic of Serbia in nine sub-sectors, including higher education and science.

As a cross-cutting approach to all these sub-sectors, the Strategy has defined concrete (2012, p. 8) strategic development objectives (Improving the quality of the process and outcomes of education; Increasing participation of the population in all educational levels; achieving and maintaining the relevance of education, and increasing the efficiency of the use of all the education resources) that aim to ensure a systematic and structured intervention in achieving the set policies and measures. Key orientations (2012, p. 9) of this strategy are quality of education, quality staff, external assessment and accreditation, and increased financing of education. The latter is set to be increased gradually from 4.5 % of the GDP in 2012 to a formidable 6 % in 2020. The improved financing, according to the Strategy would be oriented towards ensuring and improving resources and working conditions that would lead to quality education. However, nowhere in the text do the strategic goals measures specifically address teaching and learning spaces!

The Strategy has also set a number of concrete quantitative indicators, to facilitate monitoring and supervision of implementation of the foreseen policies and measures. Indicators for higher education and science include the following:

- 40% - 50% of those who have completed four-year secondary vocational schools (15% - 18.5% of the generation) and 95% of those who have completed grammar schools (35% of the generation) are enrolled in higher education.
- 70% of enrolled complete higher education (vocational or basic academic studies), within or with one year delay so that the participation of highly educated in the observed generation, from 2020 is at least 35%, and most likely 38.5%;
- About 50% of students who complete basic academic studies continue their education in master’s academic studies while at least 10% of students who complete master’s academic studies continue their studies in doctoral studies;
- At least 60% of doctoral students complete their studies during their duration so that at least 200 doctoral students per million inhabitants complete their studies on time. At least 10% of doctoral study programs are shared with foreign universities;

It is worth pointing out that none of the indicators includes any targets in the field of infrastructure, teaching and learning spaces, equipment, teaching and learning resources and so on.

Regarding distance learning instruction in the Republic of Serbia, a report dealing with accreditation infrastructure in Serbia found that “Within the distance learning studies curricula market, the first to enroll the full state accreditation was a private university that received accreditation in the field of social sciences during 2009, while

the first public university that was accredited for the DLS was from the area of engineering and technology during the same year. Reference [31] discussed that this field of competition among academic institutions in Serbia becomes more and more popular and attractive, as the new education platforms emerged with the growing interests – curricula in English language, joint master programs with other Universities, partnerships with different organizations regarding students’ internships etc. Page 5).

The MoESTD published an annual progress report on the implementation of Strategy 2020 (MoESTD, 2020) in which it presents achievements in implementing the activities included in its Action Plan for 2018 for implementation of Strategy 2020. In the section on higher education (2020, pp. 114-117) the Report outlines all activities in the action plan that were foreseen to be implemented during 2018. The same as in the strategic document, the 54 activities of the action plan do not specifically address teaching and learning spaces. To find out more about the research topic, the research looked for T&L spaces relevant provisions in the accreditation standards and regulations of the National Accreditation Board.

Accreditation standards and T&L Spaces in the Republic of Serbia

The National Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Serbia approved Regulation on Standards and Procedures for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions in January 2019. This document (National Council for Higher Education, 2019) outlines the conditions and procedures for accreditation of higher education institutions. The Regulation determines 13 standards against which the HEI-s are to be assessed for accreditation. Of these, two standards refer specifically to teaching and learning spaces: Space and equipment (Standard 9) and Library, course books and IT support (Standard 10).

Standard 9, Space and Equipment, states that: “The higher education institution provides the space and equipment necessary for the quality performance of all forms of lectures. Standards of space and equipment are determined by the educationally-scientific, namely educationally-artistic field.” These two standards will be analysed in more detail since they provide the key policies and provisions in the field of T&L spaces and educational technology in the HEI-s in Serbia.

The first guideline (9.1.) provides that there should be 2 m² per student of teaching and learning spaces, as part of the 4 m² of gross area per student (including hallways, administration and other areas). These spaces, according to this regulation, have to be accessible (also for persons with physical impairments) based on Rulebook on Technical Accessibility Standards (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 46/2013) or the principle of universal design. The further Guidelines set out the key conditions on teaching and learning spaces: premises for administration and student services (9.2), urban, technical, technological and hygiene conditions and ownership issues of the facilities that have to be dedicated for educational purposes (9.3), modern technical equipment aligned with the curricula (9.4) and with the safety standards (9.5), and spaces to facilitate the operation of the Student Parliament (9.6).

Further, the guidelines provide specifically for a number of curricular fields that require more detailed regulation for quality instruction in HEI-s: natural sciences and mathematics (NSM), medical science, technical and technological sciences, and Arts. Therein, higher education institutions are asked to meet additional requirements according to the specific nature of studies, the need for practical work, and student numbers. Thus in NSM laboratories are required based on the nature of the study programmes and student numbers; in medical science, resources are required for practical teaching of pre-clinical courses and clinical facilities to carry out clinical training at a capacity of minimum 20 % of the total number of students enrolled; the technical and technological sciences require laboratories, institutes, research and innovation units, experimental fields (for agriculture, forestry and similar) and so on depending of the study disciplines and broader study fields; the field of arts provides for special requirements, such as workshops, laboratories, exhibition areas, concert
halls, film and TV studios and so on, depending on the specificity in the art field. All these resources, spaces and facilities need to be either owned by the HEI-s or leased for a minimum period of seven years.

The next Standard 10, which provides for the library, course books and IT support (2019, p. 17), states that “The higher education institution has the appropriate library equipped with the necessary textbooks for the teaching and IT resources and services that are used for fulfilling the basic tasks.” There are four guidelines that further elaborate this standard by regulating the number and field of the library units (10.1), provision of teaching materials, publications and additional teaching resources in sufficient numbers (10.2), provision of IT equipment of a minimum one computer classroom with internet access (10.3), provision of training for teaching staff and students on the utilization of library and IT resources.

This standard appears to be somewhat lagging behind technological developments since it is focused mainly on library units as paper-based resources and physical teaching materials. Online libraries and eJournals and open-source journals do not appear to the needed extent (in line with the current technological developments and trends) in this standard and the respective guidelines.

However, a study (J. Ruso, 2015) looking at the quality assurance and accreditation of (private and public) higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia addressed the distance learning component to find that “Within the distance learning studies curricula market, ... this field of competition among academic institutions in Serbia becomes more and more popular and attractive, as the new education platforms emerged with the growing interests – curricula in English language, joint master programs with other Universities, partnerships with different organizations regarding students’ internships etc. This means that higher education institutions are working to update the learning environment in Serbia in line with the technological advances even if not provided clearly in the accreditation guidelines.

Another standard that indirectly addresses the issue of the teaching and learning spaces is Standard 8 regulating the accreditation requirements for HEI-s in the field of students and student services dedicated to persons with special educational needs and members of sensitive groups. This standard provides that, “The higher education institution shall introduce the rulebook on criteria and means of providing support to students from sensitive social groups.” and “The rulebook shall contain detailly elaborated mechanisms of support provided by the higher education institution, the conditions under which they shall be provided and the source for financing these services.” In the end, the standard provides that every HEI must have a member of staff charged with planning support to these student categories. Various concrete requirements (such as sign language interpreters, adaptation of textbooks, assistive technology, adaptation of the schedule of studies, and so on) are then described serving to improve student performance and timely completion of the courses. This standard appears to be the most advanced set of rulings regarding the creation of a student-friendly working atmosphere that provides for equal opportunities and human rights-based approach. It appears to be in line with the key features of this approach since:

“A human rights-based approach is about empowering people to know and claim their rights and increasing the ability and accountability of individuals and institutions who are responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights”. According to the Finnish UNICEF Committee guidelines for NGO-s, HRBA “is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights.” (Unicef Finland, 2015) The legal framework in Serbia is based on the principle of a human rights-based approach in regard to teaching and learning spaces and more.
University policy/ strategies of HEIs in Kosovo

Based on accreditation criteria and standards, all higher education institutions in Kosovo are required to develop, approve and implement their institutional strategic development plans. The research has shown that all public HEIs have adopted their strategic plans and made them publicly available on their web pages. Normally, the strategic plans are the best addresses to learn about the key institutional priorities in the main development areas of the HEIs in Kosovo. However, there is a strong impression that the key motive behind strategic planning in Kosovo HEIs is to meet the requirements of the Accreditation Agency. This brief analysis of the strategic plans of five Kosovo public universities aims to present the stated goals and policies in the field of teaching and learning spaces, as well as any initiatives for digitization of provision and online learning.

Strategic Plan of the University of Pristina “Hasan Prishtina”25

For the purpose of this study, the strategic planning documents were analysed of the seven public universities. The University of Pristina “Hasan Prishtina” (UP) as the oldest and largest higher education institution in Kosovo drafted and approved its three-year Strategy and Action Plan 2017-2019 (Universiteti i Prishtines "Hasan Prishtina", 2017). The mission statement does not explicitly focus on teaching and learning spaces, but rather on the role of the university in society, quality assurance, research and internationalization.

The Plan determines eight core strategies (or intervention areas), eight strategic initiatives (or strategic objectives), that are further broken down into dozens of measures for every objective; the measures are further elaborated in hundreds of concrete activities for the achievement of the set core strategies. At the same time, the rector’s office requested the faculties (academic units) to develop their action plans for the implementation of the Strategy in their constituent units. When we checked in two academic units, we found that they all develop their respective operational plans in the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. However, the level of implementation and lack of funds to implement concrete measures gave an impression of the lack of purpose of planning at the level of academic units. After additional inquiries, we learned that these plans are there mainly to meet the formal requirements for accreditation by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (see accreditation standards)!

In the section called “Core strategies and strategic initiatives” the University of Pristina comprehensive Plan states eight core strategies (or intervention areas) of the UP, providing for (i) staff development and quality assurance, (ii) research excellence, (iii) competitive study programmes, (iv) ensuring high standard of operation, (v) investment in tools for success (providing for teaching and learning spaces), (vi) learning for a diverse world, (vii) links to the society, and (internationalization and globalization. One of the key intervention areas (v) states the need to “Invest in tools for success: Increase investment in new technologies, new and existing campus facilities, and library operations, collections and access.” (2017, p. 35) So, teaching and learning spaces and new technologies find a prominent place in the general strategic level as one of the eight key intervention areas of this Plan.

The fifth intervention area (invest in tools for success) is further translated into concrete activities distributed among more than one strategic objective. The seventh strategic objective (Infrastructure Development) foresees to:

- create a database and inventory of infrastructure at UP for all campuses,
- develop an infrastructure and physical systems Master Plan, and
- develop a strategy for managing campus resources.

Interviewed University of Pristina managing staff stated that little has been done for the implementation of these measures. They explained this with the changed priorities due to the COVID–19 pandemic.

Apart from addressing the T&L spaces and technology specifically in a separate strategic objective, the Plan also applies an integrated approach when providing for interventions in the learning environment to improve student performance. Thus, other strategic objectives in this Plan, address aspects that are relevant for the creation of enabling and affirmative teaching and learning spaces. For illustration, as part of the first strategic objective (1. Teaching, Research, and Services), measure 1.1. of the Plan refers to *improving instruction by introducing new methodologies* such as e-learning, applied learning, student-centred learning, formative assessment, mastery of critical thinking strategies, research-based learning and so on. This approach is fully in line with the trends in higher education internationally. This measure (1.1.) is further elaborated (2017, p. 45) into an activity to "Improve the physical and the virtual environment to enhance student-centred learning."

The activity then foresees efforts to assess the physical and virtual learning environment, improve the same, provide the needed technological support, offer library services and access to e-resources and build an interactive learning environment to serve all UP students. Thus, the Strategic Plan provides a relatively well-thought approach to improve the T&L spaces, including by taking in consideration and making use of the technological trends and developments in virtual learning.

As has been seen recently, all these foreseen activities and measures came very handy when the University of Pristina staff and students were faced with the Pandemic COVID-19 in early 2020. The University of Pristina and all higher education institutions expressed their readiness to continue their instruction online in the same week when the Government imposed a strict lock-down closing all higher education institutions in Kosovo. The instruction continued online using Zoom or Google Meet applications. These applications were sometimes integrated into the institutional digital platforms and sometimes were used separately so that teachers created classes with their students. The latter proved rather cumbersome and, as was put by an interviewed rector, it did not provide much evidence or opportunities for tracking of student and staff teaching and learning activities (more on COVID–19 pandemic response please below).

In a study of the decisions of the Governing Board of the University of Pristina, carried out during 2017 and 2018, over 100 decisions of the Board were scrutinized to assess the quality of decision-making at this university. The desk research part of the study found that the vast majority (over 80 %) of the decisions referred to requests of the academic staff for unpaid leave, around 10 % referred to the programme and administrative decisions (including waiving the student fees) and three decisions referred to strategic planning and governance (2017, p. 23). It can be inferred that teaching and learning spaces were not at the focus of the UPGoverning Board during 2017, based on the decisions taken by the Board during the same year. Only one decision concerned the setting up of a working group for drafting of the University Strategic Plan (that dealt with the teaching and learning spaces).
The Strategic Plan 2018-2022 (Universiteti "Ukshin Hoti" Prizren, 2018) applies a similar logic and structure as the strategic plan of the University of Pristina— which is in fact a rather uncommon approach in strategic planning processes applied nowadays. There are seven strategic priorities, followed by nine strategic goals, which are in turn followed by eight strategic fields and initiatives (formulated as objectives). The strategic fields and initiatives are further broken down into strategic measures and activities at the level of academic units—faculties. The strategy is approved at the university level, and academic units are required to further elaborate it in developing their operational and periodic action plans.

University in Prizren (UPz) is a regional university catering higher education services in a region inhabited by over 80% of Kosovo non/Albanian and non-Serb ethnic communities. With this in mind, it would be essential for the University of Prizren to be attentive to ethnic communities and to dedicate separate strategic objectives and policies to inclusiveness, intercultural understanding and cooperation, and human rights considerations. The UPz does not appear to have adhered to this expected niche in its strategic planning.

A study into human rights-based approach in Kosovo higher education institutions (Rexhaj, 2019) found that “[The Strategic Plan of the University of Prizren] appears to lack coherence between priorities, goals, fields, initiatives and measures. For instance, linguistic diversity is included among the Strategic Priorities, but it is not reflected further in the strategic ‘initiatives’.” Only one activity of the Faculty of Education addresses student learning needs, whereas other faculties are focused on academic, management, staff development, curricular and infrastructure issues. The key purpose of the Plan appears to be to increase participation or improve the methodology of teaching.

Development of infrastructure (teaching and learning spaces) is included as one of the strategic fields and initiatives (number 7). It is further broken down into the following measures (2018, p. 23).

- making and inventory of assets
- drafting a strategy for the management of resources and assets at the UPz
- providing lecture rooms, labs and equipment to meet the study program needs;
- providing adequate Reading areas with access to e-resources
- equipping lecture rooms with the needed equipment
- building the recreational / sports pitch.

At the central (university) level, these initiatives are not further elaborated. However, the action plans developed by academic units (faculties) based on the central strategies, provide a list of activities that are intended to serve for the accomplishment of the set goals and priorities. We analysed the action plans of all six faculties to learn about the translation of the centrally set priorities into concrete activities in the field of the teaching and learning spaces and digital technologies. As a matter of fact, the centrally foreseen strategic field and initiative (7. Development of Infrastructure) expected to plan for the development of the T&L spaces appears to have been lost somewhere on the way to academic units, since it is not present in any of the action plans of the six faculties. Besides, digital technologies, inline learning, eJournals, libraries and similar aspects are not present among the activities foreseen by the faculties. For illustration, the Faculty of Computer

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26 https://uni-prizren.com/sq/planet-strategjike-upz
27 Parts are in fact copied from the UP strategy (see the eight strategic fields and the Monitoring section for illustration).
28 It is not clear if there has been an analysis of the situation (SWOT). One of the measures of the academic units is the plan to establish a doctoral programme (PhD) in one of the departments with significant lack of qualified academic staff!
Sciences foresees starting a mechatronics study programme and a PhD study programme but there are no plans to introduce more new technologies and virtual arrangements of learning in the teaching and learning processes. This can be explained by the fact that the University of Prizren suffered for a long time for the lack of qualified staff, working procedures, relevant teaching and learning equipment and so on. As a result, it lost accreditation by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency in 2019.

The Strategic Plan 2017-2022 of the University “Kadri Zeka” in Gjilan

This Strategic Plan (Universiteti "Kadri Zeka" Gjilan, 2017) sets out the development priorities and goals of the University for the period of six years. It also outlines the key challenges it is facing in its efforts to accomplish the set vision and mission. One of the key priorities of the UKZ is its relation with the industry and society. The same priority sees the main support to students as preparing them for employment in the labour market. This is the overall approach towards students throughout this strategic plan.

Notwithstanding the lack of a more systematic approach, the strategic plan of the UKZ appears to have students among the focal points of its strategic thinking. For illustration, the first priority on linkages with industry and society pays due importance to providing students with relevant skills for the labour market; the strategic priority dedicated to students deals with creating conditions for increasing enrolment and improving conditions for student mobility, provision of library services, literature, providing good working conditions and so on.

Infrastructure – or teaching and learning spaces – are among the ten strategic priorities of the UKZ (linkages to the society, study programmes, quality assurance, students, research, internationalization, profilization of the UKZ, human resources, infrastructure, and financing). In the field of infrastructure, UKZ aims to achieve the following strategic objectives: the building of a new campus, digitization of the instruction process, and improvement of library services. Besides these, working conditions, new teaching and learning approaches and the learning environment are integrated within other strategic objectives, such as study programmes and student issues. In fact, this strategic document has an accentuated student-centred approach in all its segments.

Regarding the new campus, the drafters admit that it depends on other factors (governmental financing and local authorities to provide the building lot) and that it may take a longer time before it comes to fruition. On the other hand, there is a clear strategy on the digitization of instruction, learning spaces and student services at the UKZ, even before any projected moving into a new campus.

The development strategy of the UKZ contains concrete measures for digitization of the process of instruction, albeit within a relatively narrow understanding of the e-learning processes. The measure provides that UKZ will prioritize the application of information technology in the teaching and research process. This is expected to be achieved through a moodle-like platform for facilitating education provision and teacher-student communication as a means to improve the quality of provision. As the next step of digitization is seen the application of e-learning in the academic process.

Another strategic measure refers to library services. This measure foresees increasing reading spaces, providing more books and new literature, which are in line with the curricular goals and content. Besides they are introducing an electronic system for management and use of library resources.

29 They had their accreditation reinstated in 2019 after numerous improvements and following another round of external evaluation for accreditation by the KAA in 2020.
In the case of the University of Gjilan, the research team analysed all regulations and decisions published on the university webpage. The University administration has published\(^\text{31}\) the main documents issued by the management, including Board decisions, regulations, action plans of academic units and so on since the beginning of its functioning. Out of 28 regulations and decisions published on the webpage, 13 regulate academic issues and 15 regulate administrative and financial issues.

The institutional decisions address mainly academic aspects of staff and students at the university. These are mainly decisions regulating curricula, studies, working bodies, student and staff elections and so on. They do not directly address issues of infrastructure and learning spaces. This is probably because of the lack of funds and decision-making powers. Unlike the oldest University of Pristina, the seven new public universities do not enjoy full financial and institutional autonomy. For any development policy or plan, they need to refer to the Ministry of Education and Science which is responsible to manage and approve financing of salaries, goods and services and capital investment in these universities.

The Strategic Plan 2018-2021 of the University of Mitrovica “Isa Boletini”

This strategic plan (Universiteti i Mitrovice “Isa Boletini”, 2018) employs a similar planning approach to that of the University of Pristina. It starts with strategic priorities, to continue with strategic goals and further strategic initiatives. However, unlike other universities and to some extent, similarly to the University of Gjakova, this strategy is more focused on student issues. It dedicates an entire strategic initiative (2. Learning resources and student support services) to student issues. In this and other strategic measures the Plan foresees measures that focus on improving student support services, in improving student performance and their participation in learning and decision-making activities.

Further in this report is presented the case of the University of Mitrovica and its role in the life of the town of Mitrovica.

A university helping to remake a town

Mitrovica is a town in the north of Kosovo with a long tradition in mining industry. The town has owed its development entirely to the Trepca mine since ancient times. Surrounded by hills on three sides on the west, north and east it stretches on a valley cut by riverbeds of three rivers: Ibri, Sitnica and Lushta. Mitrovica flourished during the decades after the World War II, and in particular during the seventies and eighties of the Twentieth Century. This is the time when mining of ores of zinc and lead, but also silver and gold, were modernised to see the Trepca mine grow into a large combine employing over 20000 workers and with a turnover of hundreds of millions in US dollars. Education, health, sports and culture saw their golden times with high quality schools and a faculty of metallurgy and mining in Mitrovica (as part of the University of Pristina), modern hospitals, dozens of successful amateur and professional sports clubs in various sports, with regionally renowned folk and rock music bands, museums, art galleries and so on.

However, the intensive social, economic, and cultural development also had its downside due to the heavy reliance of its economy on uncontrolled exploitation of mines: for decades Mitrovica was the most polluted town in Europe. The technologies used to exploit the ores were not modern enough to save the environment and the health of the people. The intensive exploitation and enormous lead and zinc processing plants brought

\(^\text{31}\) [https://www.uni-gjilan.net/universiteti/dokumentet-e-rendesishme/](https://www.uni-gjilan.net/universiteti/dokumentet-e-rendesishme/)
to a downgrading of the environment. This was reflected in the number of people suffering from blood and lung diseases, the highest in Kosovo during the seventies and eighties.

In 1989, miners of the Trepca Combine spearheaded a movement of resistance against the then Serbian regime’s crackdown on the Kosovo political autonomy as one of the eight constituent members within the then Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. In retaliation, the regime imposed administrative measures on the combine, changed the management, dismissed Albanian miners from their jobs and cut off any financing of social, cultural, education and health services to Albanian population in Kosovo and in the town. In response, Albanians built a parallel system providing basic education, health, cultural and even administration services. At the same time, however, the Albanian population started leaving Kosovo in search for means of existence mainly in Western European countries (such as Germany and Switzerland). There was a completely different outlook from the golden times (of the sixties till eighties) when the war of 1999 found the population of Mitrovica impoverished and barely making the ends meet.

The war of 1999 left deep scars among the population of Kosovo in the form of losses in human lives, devastation, pillages, missing persons, displaced and divided families, war prisoners and so on. On top of these, the end of the war found Mitrovica divided in two halves: the Serb dominated in the North and Albanian dominated in the South with French KFOR and river Iber/Ibar standing between two deeply divided and confronted communities. A number of Albanians from the North and Serbs from the South had to move to the other side, leaving all their belongings behind, whereas small numbers who remained continued to live to this very day surrounded by uncertainty and animosity among the majority community. Other smaller ethnic communities, such as Bosniacs, Turks, and Roma, have been going through similar uncertainties about their life and lacking any decent perspective. The bridge over the river Iber/Ibar remains a symbol of division for over two decades. This bridge has seen frequent skirmishes, protests, demonstrations and blockades coming from both sides during the twenty two decades.

As mentioned above, the town was divided in two nearly equal parts: most of the individual housing - residential areas, Trepca mines, sports-hall and football stadium remained in the ‘Albanian’ south side, whereas the town-hall, court and prosecution edifices, police building and prison, collective housing edifices, Faculty of Mining and Metallurgy, the Higher Engineering School, hospital, and Trepca processing plants remained in the north – ‘Serbian’ side. This division was only solidified by the approach of the international community and by the Ahtisaari Comprehensive Settlement Proposal (Ahtisaari, 2007) to the issue of Kosovo that proposed that the ‘Municipality’ in North Mitrovica have separate competencies from its south sister town, including in the field of higher education, by foreseeing that it run a university with instruction in Serbian language.

Any closer look will realise that most of the state and governance institutions were left in the North, but not only. The Albanian students did not have a faculty any more to go to; people were addressing their legal grievances to the improvised Mitrovica Court in the neighbouring smaller town of Vushtri / Vucitrn down south; similarly, sick people could only visit doctors in Vushtri / Vucitrn or in Pristina unable to go to the hospital across the river; there was no place to turn to for municipal administration services; people could not go to work in the Trepca Processing Plant in the North, thus loosing their jobs and so on. As a result, the formerly most prosperous town of Kosovo had turned into an impoverished and headless town. Headless because all institutions that make up a bigger town had to be redone: administration, police, court, university, part of schools, hospital and so on. So, for the next twenty years, the South Mitrovica has been a town in the remaking amidst a situation of extreme poverty and political instability. The University of Mitrovica has played a critical role in this process of remaking.
A brief overview of history of higher education in Mitrovica

The first higher education institution in Mitrovica was the Higher Engineering School established in 1961. This was a vocational post-secondary school (2005, p. 208) that organized study programmes in technical areas (mining, metallurgy, and technology). The Faculty of Metallurgy and Mining (University of Pristina, 2005) was established in 1974 as one of the academic units of the University of Prishtina to meet the needs of the Trepa combine for highly qualified staff. Initially, it consisted of two departments (i) Mining and Metallurgy and (ii) Technology. The Department of Geology was added in 1981. During the nineties of the 20th Century, after the expulsion from their facilities, the Faculty operated in the primary school Nazmi Gafurri in Mitrovica. Until 2005 around 1500 students had graduated in instruction in Albanian in the departments of this faculty (2005, pp. 191-192).

Figure 9: Original buildings of the Faculty of Mining and Metallurgy, currently used by the University in North Mitrovica

Source: AAB research team

The Faculty continued operating within the University of Pristina until 2013 when a university was established by the Kosovo Government in Mitrovica. According to the University of Mitrovica web page: “The Government of the Republic of Kosovo established the Public University of Mitrovica on 6 March 2013, while the Kosovo Assembly ratified the decision on 31 May 2013. According to the Provisional Statute, approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, within the University of Mitrovica “Isa Boletini” (UMIB) operate six faculties: Faculty of Geosciences (FGS), Faculty of Food Technology (FFT), Faculty of Mechanical and Computer Engineering (FMCE), Faculty of Law (FL), Faculty of Economics (FE) and Faculty of Education (FE).”

The new fledgling University started operating in very difficult working conditions in the premises rented from the Trepa combine. Itself not fully operational, the Trepa combine let its main office to the new University in 2013. These premises (small offices, narrow hallways, small classrooms, unkempt and deficient laboratories), originally not dedicated for education, did not meet even the basic conditions for work of a university. However, the Municipality of Mitrovica assigned to the University of Mitrovica 19 hectares of public land and the Government of Kosovo allocated funds for the construction of what was to become a new and state of the art campus of the University of Mitrovica.

32 The Higher Engineering School in Mitrovica was established by a decision of the Executive Council of Kosova No. 2271 of 10/07/1961.

33 After the opening of the Faculty (a scientific study program) the Higher Technical School started studies in two new profiles: mechanical engineering and Electrical engineering.
Figure 10: Facilities of the Trepca Combine used as premises for the University of Mitrovica until 2018

Source: AAB research team

Even three years after it was established, there were only 128 members of teaching staff and around 2000 bachelor and master students (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2016) attending mainly engineering and mechanical study programmes and a slowly growing number of students being admitted to social studies (economy, law, and education). This was a very laborious process of birth and growth of a new higher education institution. The reason (according to the management of the University) that they opted to organize studies in social sciences was that in order to be accredited as a university, a higher education institution in Kosovo had to organize studies in at least five programmes and had to cater for at least five thousand students (2011, p. Art.10.2). Increasing student numbers in mechanical, engineering and technology programmes was deemed difficult due to the lack of interest among future students and because such studies were extremely costly for the impoverished Kosovo government and the town of Mitrovica.

As a result of difficult working conditions, the University temporarily lost its accreditation in 2019 (team, 2019). Loss of accreditation for the University also meant loss of little hope for the youth in this part of Kosovo for higher education of their choice close to their homes. As one student told the author of this report after the accreditation was lost: “We have nowhere to go now. I was hoping to enrol master studies at my university and I cannot afford to go to study in Pristina. They would not admit us to study there anyway. What am I going to do?”

In response to this situation, the university staff, but also industry, community and friends doubled their efforts to support the University plea for reaccreditation. Part of the university management was changed, dozens of regulations were developed, a new development plan was designed, more staff was hired. Since October 2018, the staff and students started moving to the newly constructed facilities in the new campus. However, the process was not completed until after the accreditation was lost. Therefore, the management increased efforts to move completely to the new campus during 2019. The new spacious and state-of-the-art campus provided better working conditions for the University staff and students, but also afforded compelling arguments in favour of accreditation. Fully equipped classrooms, theatres, laboratories, teacher rooms, hallways, and common areas completely changed the outlook and image of the University. As a matter of fact, the new campus is a significant contribution not only to the University but also to the town and community in this divided town. The accreditation was regained after the external assessment in July 2020 returning hope and perspective for a better future to the youth of Mitrovica and the municipalities around it.

A state-of-the-art new campus in the making

The University of Mitrovica “Isa Boletini” campus is positioned in the upper part of the south Mitrovica with easy access to city downtown and the roads leading to other towns in Kosovo. It is also close to the recently
redone Iber / Ibar riverbed and a beautiful water reservoir and recreational area built on it by the municipality South Mitrovica. The campus, itself built in a valley, looks towards the beautiful hills and mountain ranges in the north. The first thing that catches one’s eye at entering the campus is the huge fenced area of 19 hectares with well-kempt parks, lawns, trees, flowers and a large symbol of the university in the middle. The interviewed architect who designed the first two building told the research team that they were aware from the beginning that they need to provide best and state-of-the-art solutions for the campus, which would be implemented over a period of five years. The Government provided ample funds and flexibility for the project that has helped the town remake and rethink itself and that makes not only residents of Mitrovica to be proud of.

Figure 11: The new campus and the rector’s office of the University of Mitrovica (left); a new section under construction overlooking North (right)

Source: Research team

Figure 12: Student dormitories (right) and student restaurant) under construction

Source: Research team

There are currently five edifices (with the dormitories and the student restaurant still under construction) in the university campus that provide ample, useful and pleasant internal and external learning and leisure spaces. The rector’s office is built close to the entrance on the concept of an octagon with an atrium covering the central and common areas of the office. The interviewed university management staff told the researchers about the stark contrast in working conditions between the old building in the Trepca combine and the rector’s office in the new campus.

Asked about the overall concept of the campus, the main architect stated that “The main goal of this project was to establish a relationship between the internal and the external, that is the relation between function / the interior with architecture / the exterior, by paying particular attention to the location where the university campus will be set-up with the purpose of building a new paradigm and vision that cherishes the character of Mitrovica – the city of miners by intertwining the past and the future of the town.”
This overall goal was further translated into architectural lines and shapes, or as put by the author “faculty buildings were shaped in a planimetry of regular geometric forms, with all lines meeting in right angles, with cubic sections strictly combined in a way that does not allow for arcs and bows, and avoiding any asymmetry or irregularity (as should be the education in Kosovo), and by defining these forms with harmonised materials that do not affect the function of the space and the light factor.”

The entrance to every building provides ramps for easy access for people with physical impairments. There are wide staircases and three elevators available on every floor that allow for quick access for all students and staff to all floors. There are no bumps or elevated floors that would impede persons using wheelchairs from accessing any area in the buildings. The markings of directions and signs are in two and sometimes in three languages (Albanian, English, and Serbian).

*Figure 13: The two main buildings of the UM campus – from the architectural design (2017).*

*Figure 14: The two main buildings – after the construction (2019)*

*Source: The author of the architectural design and blueprint*

The two faculty buildings in six stores provide over 30,000 square meters of learning areas to the staff and students. The interior of the facilities in the new University campus meets all the requirements of a modern university. During the visit to the campus, the research team were able to see eleven contemporary labs designed to best meet the curricular requirements of the study programmes. In several other laboratories furniture and equipment were being assembled and installed. The laboratories cover all study programmes, from mechanical laboratories in the basement to child psychology labs and legal clinics in the upper floors. The labs are equipped with modern equipment that can serve more than just teaching and learning purposes. Most of the equipment are such that find application in solving everyday problems of the industry and population in mechanics, heavy industry, food technology, metrology, and so on. For instance, the three food technology labs are equipped with numerous gadgets that can measure and assess quality of water, food, soil, and air. The mechanics lab is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment in the field of mechatronics and computerised metal processing (CC machines). The research team was informed by the hosts and witnessed in person as more equipment was being assembled in labs all floors – faculties.

- The interviewed architects, who designed the buildings, gave the following account about the project: “The requirement in the building licence by the Municipality of Mitrovica for five floors above (and three floors below) the ground level was too high and did not meet the nature of a university building. He added that this did not match the architectural team’s idea about theatres, labs, classrooms and so on. The team found itself between architectural requirements as given by the municipality and the
requirements by the employer (the University of Pristina) and teaching staff for architectural arrangements to best meet the curricular aspects. Lacking any national standards that would regulate design of university premises and learning spaces, the team had to resort to various international standards and good practices\(^34\) to build understanding, invent creative solutions, and bring together the two sides. The international standards included the following:

- “Architectural design” Ernst Neufert
- “Building Codes ILLUSTRATED” Francis D.K. Ching; Steven R Winkel, FAIA
- “Building a University” John Leroux
- “University Planning and Architecture” Jonathan Coulson; Paul Roberts and Isabelle Taylor
- “Guide to Campus Architecture” John Beldon Scott & Rodney P. Lehnertz

The result of this cooperation was that the common areas and hallways provide a pleasant environment for students with numerous beautiful seating and leisure arrangements. Starting from the basement, all floors are clearly marked with directions given for administration, staff rooms, labs, classrooms, library and so on. The library provides ample space, reading areas with around 300 seats, thousands of library units in books and journals, several individual eRooms, and new technology (over 100 modern PCs) for eLearning and internet research. More technology is available for learning, research and administration purposes for students in the hallways and common areas.

*Figure 15: Up-to-date classrooms, theatres, libraries in the University of Mitrovica*

Source: AAB research team

According to one of the interviewed architects who was involved in the early stages of the design of UMIB campus, “Flexibility and adaptability of spaces allows to adapt teaching and learning spaces to the diverse purposes and situations which may occur in the continuous process of learning. From the more narrow concept of the classroom / theatre as a sole learning space, now the understanding has shifted to seeing the entire school / university campus as a learning area, including hallways, common areas, canteens, and other areas as spaces where learning and studying take place.”

Each of the five floors houses one faculty (organization unit consisting of one or more departments and study programmes) of the university. Usually, classrooms and labs extend from the central common area on the two main wings, with faculty management and administration placed in the center. The basement houses heavy machinery of the mechanic labs and the controlling rooms for the heating, cooling and ventilation systems. The attic and patios on roof tops house over 400 modern solar panels providing for over 40 % of the energy supply needed for heating, cooling, ventilation and operation of the equipment machinery.

*Figure 16:* The Central heating, cooling and ventilation sector is partly powered by solar energy. Over 250 solar panels provide more 30 % of energy needs for the university campus.

*Figure 17:* Classrooms and hallways

Role of the University in remaking of the divided town

Today, population of Mitrovica south struggles to make the ends meet with unemployment, poverty and migration levels among the highest in Kosovo. The Trepca combine is stills struggling to restart its operations, albeit with very basic capacity. The Trepca combine has suffered the same problems as the town of Mitrovica as a result of the division: its ore processing capacities remained in the north, while the mining plant is in the south. Consequently, Trepca combine of the south is selling ores as raw material, which in turn means significantly reduced income.

On the other hand, however, a sort of a deindustrialization process is taking place in the south. The town is rethinking and remaking itself, albeit at a slower than wished for pace, through a restructuring of economic activities and providing a full range of social services. The new municipality is providing a full range of administration services to the population, there are fully operational police facilities and policing services, there are new regional hospital buildings and facilities, the new university campus would make any city in
Europe proud, there is a court building in the south dealing with civil and administrative cases\textsuperscript{35}, a great Omnisports Centre has become operational on the bordering line between south and north, the riverbeds of the three rivers are being redone and a new swimming and accumulation water reservoir area has been constructed around them, the football stadium has been redone to meet the UEFA criteria and so on. All these have given the town in the south a character of its own turning it into a better living area for all its residents.

\textit{Figure 18: A satellite image of the town of Mitrovica divided along the flow of the river Iber / Ibar (the upper river in the image)}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image18}
\caption{A satellite image of the town of Mitrovica divided along the flow of the river Iber / Ibar (the upper river in the image)}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: Google Map}

\textit{Figure 19: The bridge dividing South and North of the Mitrovica town.}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image19}
\caption{The bridge dividing South and North of the Mitrovica town.}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: Google}

\textsuperscript{35} The Criminal Court of the entire region of Mitrovica (south and north) is operating in the North Mitrovica.
Figure 20: The Municipal Building of the South Mitrovica; and the OMNI Sport Centre in the bordering area between South and North – invested by the European Union.

Source: Google and research team.

Figure 21: A view of the indoors pool in the OMNI Sport Centre; and the Regional Court in Mitrovica South.

Source: Google

Figure 22: The city Football Stadium that meets the UEFA standards.

Source: Google
Figure 23: An aerial image of the football stadium, the reservoir and the recreational area around the riverbed (on the left). The Regional Hospital in Mitrovica (image on the right).

Source: Google
Response by higher education institutions to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kosovo

Kosovo registered its first case of infection with COVID – 19 on 13 March 2020. One day before, the Government of Kosovo took a decision (Ref. 01/07 of 11 March 2020) that imposed a strict lock-down on all institutions and social activities in response to the Pandemic in Kosovo. Schools and universities were closed as a result and stopped their education activities. The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation responded by bringing a decision to organize online instruction for pre-university education in Kosovo (Ref. 03/2020, of 27 March 2020). Even before that decision by the Ministry, the Conference of Rectors convened to discuss the new situation and decided to resume instruction by delivering instruction online. Private higher education institutions did the same. As a result, only one week after the lock-down, most of the higher education institutions were operating online. The higher education theatres, classrooms and labs transformed into cyber forms of delivery.

What happened during the COVID-19 pandemic is that there was a complete turnaround in the understanding of the concept of the teaching and learning spaces and even the broader concept of the learning environment. Whereas before COVID – 19 outbreak, at least in Kosovo, online learning was seen as a trendy and alternative form of delivery of instruction that could at most serve to attract student interest or lower expenses of engaging teachers from overseas, suddenly it became the only means of communication and interaction between staff and students. More so, it turned into the only management tool serving for tracking of instruction, student support services, and communication between all parties.

The online instruction in Kosovo higher education institutions was carried out in two main ways: (i) using available platforms and applications such as Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom or Microsoft Teams, whereby teachers established direct communication with the students inviting them individually to the learning sessions; or (ii) integrating Zoom or Google Meet within their own Moodle-like platforms (called SEMS in public universities or eService at AAB) to facilitate communication and interaction between students and teaching staff.

The latter allowed more accurate evidence and easier tracking of student and teacher activities. Based on the accounts of the University of Mitrovica interviewed management, the UMIB applied the limited combined approach, nesting Zoom in their application to facilitate communication between staff and students. Regarding student assessment, most universities and higher education institutions applied written assignment for formative assessment and skipped one exams’ session of summative assessment in April 2020.

AAB College on the other hand, applied a more complex approach by integrating online learning into its eService digital platform. Before the Covid – 19 pandemic, eService was used to facilitate communication and interaction between teaching staff and students.
The Google Meet platform functions were integrated to organize lectures and exercises with students. This was made possible by integrating the google meet ID / link into the AAB platform function for the weekly schedule of instructions. This integration made it possible for the AAB to apply its own tracking mechanism also to activities taking place through Google platform. For the purpose of student assessment, AAB had already and successfully piloted an online testing platform as part of eService before the start of the COVID–19 pandemic. The testing platform came handy because it made up for paper-based and oral testing in the situation of the lock-down.

When asked about the main challenges, the staff of the AAB College Software Development and Programming Unit stated that they were faced with a new situation that interfered abruptly with the ongoing plans of the unit for digitization of instruction. Firstly, it meant that the online testing platform had to be rolled-out for all staff and students while it had just been piloted. Secondly, it involved providing interface with Google Meet and thirdly, they needed to design and implement a teaching staff training programme on the new functions on a very short notice. They designed written / video instructions, information packages, and brief training modules for the purpose. The teaching staff and students responded with enthusiasm (at the outset in particular), which helped to overcome numerous difficulties in the process. Unlike students of other higher education institutions that did not have the online testing platform, AAB students were able to sit for their
exams in the April 2020 exams session. In June 2020 when the lockdown restrictions were partly lifted up AAB organized combined online and classroom-based exams depending on the nature of the courses and physical availability of the teachers (due to travel restrictions from countries in the region).

The AAB management organized extensive support for the teaching staff by providing a 24/7 help-desk, organizing regular daily meetings with its senior management and weekly meetings at the department level. The faculty deans and quality assurance officers had admin access to staff accounts and intervened every time there was a need either by writing to advise the staff member or calling an online meeting.

The process of online learning according to interviewed AAB teaching staff posed numerous challenges that could not be foreseen before. There was a feeling of boredom expressed by some students not long after online classes started being implemented. Lurking, absenteeism, improper comments by some students, were some of the minor issues identified soon after start of online learning. However, lack of student – teacher interaction, some teachers lacking the needed skills in using new technologies, problems with implementation of oral exams and technical issues were among the more serious problems that were identified by the AAB college staff while implementing online learning. On the other hand, lacking proper equipment (PCs, tablets and lap-tops) part of the students were using mobile phones which negatively affected their participation in classes. Quality of internet connection was also an important part of the quality of online learning – even though, according to interviewed staff responsible for internet connectivity in Kosovo Government, 36 there is over 98% Kosovo for its broad-band internet connectivity and coverage of its territory with internet services.

36 From an interview with Mr. Agim Kukaj, Head of Department of Post-Telecommunications and Information Technology Department at the Ministry of Economy and Environment
5. Conclusions

This research on learning and teaching spaces in higher education consisted of two parts: a) the national policies in LTSHE in the region of Western Balkans and b) institutional LTSHE policies and practices in Kosovo.

The research first part of the research has shown that countries in the region lack tailor made and specific norms and standards for higher education facilities and learning and teaching spaces. This lack was also pointed out by the interviewed architects of higher education facilities and campuses in Kosovo. As a result, architects and higher education institutions in the region have to revert to various international standards (such as Neufert) whenever starting engaging in design of new facilities or campuses. The absence for such standards becomes even more striking having in mind that similar standards and norms are in place for the pre-school and pre-university education. To illustrate the consequences of the lack of such standards, one can refer to the case of the University of Mitrovica campus where technical conditions provided by the municipality of Mitrovica required that building be five floors high, which was against the university staff or architects’ vision about the facilities.

At the institutional level of higher education in Kosovo, the research team found that the situation in public institutions differed from that in private higher education institutions. In the case of public institutions, it is the general lack of funding in Kosovo that also significantly affects the quality of learning and teaching spaces in these institutions. In addition, the situation with learning and teaching spaces in public institutions depends largely on the level of institutional autonomy of HEIs from education authorities. The University of Pristina (as the largest and oldest university in Kosovo) that enjoys full autonomy, is able to plan and implement its development policies related to learning and teaching spaces based on the concrete needs of students and staff. This is not the case with other public universities (established in the last decade) who depend on availability of funds and cumbersome approval procedures for any development initiative. Their situation depends largely on personal relations of the university management with authorised persons in central education authorities. As a result, half of them (Mitrovica, Peja, and Ferizaj) operate in brand new campuses and facilities, whereas the other half Gjilan, Gjakova, and Prizren) operate in old facilities lacking meaningful campuses for student learning, leisure and living activities.

The situation with institutional autonomy of public universities is also reflected in their planning of the development of LTS. Those lacking financial autonomy also lack any meaningful planning related to learning and teaching spaces in their regulations and strategic development plans. Somehow, physical infrastructure is left to the senior management and to education authorities. This is not the case with the University of Pristina, which includes LTS in its strategic plans. However, here too, academic units consider that any physical infrastructure and LTS issues are reserved for the rector’s office and central management. The research however, has shown that, primarily as a result of the lack of public funds, at least half of academic units in the University of Pristina (arts, agriculture, philology, law, economy, and natural sciences) have a long way to go before they provide quality learning spaces for their staff and students.

Private institutions, on the other hand, have enjoyed a decade of fast development, as a result of high demand for higher education qualifications in Kosovo. Among the private higher education institutions there are two prevailing approaches: (i) institutions that have invested and operate in their own campuses and premises dedicated exclusively to education activities and (ii) institutions who rent their premises, usually residential projects adapted to teaching and learning activities. The latter obviously lack any pro-active approach in providing a dynamic, inspiring and high-quality learning environment to their teaching staff and students and give the impression of short term planning. It is no wonder that of over 30 private institutions in 2009, there are only about a dozen operating currently in Kosovo. The other private higher education institutions have
invested in state-of-the art campuses both in the capital city of Pristina and in other cities. It remains to be seen, how many of them will survive the diminishing demand for higher education qualifications.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become a new trend in the teaching and learning spaces in the countries in the region. All institutions found themselves unprepared for the looming level of isolation imposed by the pandemic. Institutions responded differently to the newly created situation. Some provided full-fledged platforms for distance and online learning, whereas others used platforms available online such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Viber and so on. Frantic efforts are underway by higher education institutions, at the time when this report is being finalised (October 2020), to provide more sustainable arrangements and learning environments, in responding to the second upsurge of the pandemic in the last quarter of 2020. One thing is sure, teaching and learning spaces, and the very understanding of the concept of learning environment, have changed forever as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has accelerated the process of application of various forms of online and distance learning in higher education institutions in Kosovo as anywhere else internationally.
6. Recommendations

- National education authorities

Review the national legal framework regulating higher education and science to improve provisions regulating learning and teaching spaces in higher education institutions, including provisions regulating e-learning arrangements.

Design architectural norms and standards specifically targeting higher education teaching and learning spaces in the countries in the region.

Develop new national and institutional policies / regulations to introduce new understanding of teaching and learning spaces as a result of social, economic, demographic and technological changes.

Review national accreditation guidelines with a view to design new detailed guidelines and requirements for online and distance learning.

Design exchange programs for dissemination and roll-out of good regional and international practices in the field of learning and teaching spaces;

Organize regional events in the Western Balkans to exchange experiences and to start initiatives for improvement of policies and practices in the field of teaching and learning spaces in higher education institutions.

- Higher education Institutions

Review institutional strategic and development plans of higher education institutions to provide more specific measures on interior design, integration of L&T spaces and curricula, improvement of online and distance learning facilities and programs and so on.

Build human and institutional capacity to apply new policies and good practices in the field of learning and teaching spaces.

Review existing higher education facilities and spaces to introduce the new understanding of learning and teaching spaces, including online learning and the use of out-of-the-classroom areas for teaching and learning purposes.

Organize capacity building programs to improve skills in developing and implementing online and distance learning courses.

Assess needs and invest in new technologies and software for digitization of instruction, communication and administrative services.
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