

Teacher Education in Kosovo - International Influence in shaping it and obstacles in making it work in the local context

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Abstract

Teacher Education in Kosovo has undergone significant restructuring and changes after the 1999 conflict. This did not come only as a need for development of a post-conflict society but also as a need to reform the previous disintegrated and disharmonized 2 year Teacher Education programs in the country so that they are compliant with Bologna standards and European best practice.

The restructuring and change was implemented with support of international donors thus trying to copy as much as possible the best international practice. Such an example was the support from the Canadian Government in establishing the Faculty of Education at the only public University in country. Support was coming from other donors too.

The challenge that the institution is now facing is how to ensure the sustainability of initiatives in the local context once the donor support is withdrawn. Employing the evaluation and assessment policy studies, i.e. evaluation culture, from the very outset of the projects, would have prevented the spontaneous development of the provision of Teacher Education, which normally should have been a carefully planned and guided segment by the Government.

This paper is a personal reflection on the developments in reforming Teacher Education in Kosovo over the last seven years. In a way, this paper is a case study and the conference audience may find these developments useful when, and if, undergoing similar processes. This paper is a contribution to the conference sub-theme: Enhancing quality through the renewal of evaluation cultures in Teacher Education

Introduction and background of developments

After decades of hardship and difficulties for the country, including educational system, Kosovo welcomed international support after the conflict in 1999 in all the fields. It was about a decade University of Prishtina was operating underground due to the difficulties the then

Serbian regime was causing to its regular operation. Understandably enough, the quality of education suffered significantly. One of the areas that became focus of intervention for the international support was reforming the Teacher Education and aligning it with best international practices by upgrading the old teacher education programs and making them Bologna compatible, and more importantly in line with national policies and standards: 4 years Teacher Education Programs, with a proportional division of academic and professional courses, and a practicum component of developmental nature.

Canadian government supported this reform effort, in other words guided the reform, by phasing out the old outdated two years Teacher Education colleges and establishing a Faculty of Education as the only institutions at the University of Prishtina to be in charge of educating teachers complying with the Government standards and policies on Teacher Education. From the very outset of the Project, local partners, especially people from those old programs, whose job was at risk, were resistant to this change and continuously reacted against such initiative.

However, with the instruction of the Government, University decided to embark on this reform agenda without examining the risk of resistance from people within University. Being unable to reject the decision by Government and University, these people continued their resistance from within the new Faculty, after getting teaching jobs with it. As Anderson and Wenderoth suggest "Universities are stable institutions and by nature they change slowly. Changing universities has not been easy in other parts of the world either" (p158). The main motivation behind this resistance was that these people were nearing their retirement age and the establishment of this new faculty demanded also the change in classroom teaching and the whole philosophy to education, which these people found difficult to embrace at this stage of their career. Fullan (1993) warns that resistance is a normal reaction to change. But of course this did not mean that as a result resistance should be ignored, as was the case perhaps in Kosovo context.

The Canadian project was not strict enough in imposing the dynamics of the development of this new Faculty by thinking that giving local partners bigger say would help the sustainability. This led to rapid growth resulting with 10 degree programs after one year of operation. This of course satisfied everyone's expectations and enthusiasm about this new Faculty, but the issue of management and quality aspects of the programs, including staffing, were the biggest challenge this institution is still facing, which were taken into account by Teacher Education policy makers at that time.

The Canadian project commissioned twice policy studies on the sustainability and quality aspects in the Faculty of Education. But, in this case, the attempts to implement the recommendations of these studies ended at the stage when the project ended. No one seemed to be asking the question: Are we taking the risk of producing lower quality teachers than the those we already have in school system?! What would then be the whole purpose of this reform? And what is the impact of low quality Teacher Education in the societal development in a post-conflict country?

The establishment of Faculty of Education marked the biggest milestone in reforming teacher education in Kosovo. The initial structure and philosophy of its functioning should surely become a model for the west Balkan region. The program content, with a proportional division between academic, professional and practicum component, marked a significant paradigm shift in the country as to what type of teachers we want for our schools. However, as the donor community had a clear picture regarding the modern teacher education system, a significant majority of the local partners seem to be acting with the old thinking in the new environment.

Despite the changes in the approach and programme, teaching in the classroom remained the same – old rote memorization approach to teaching and learning. The question is what could have been done in order to avoid the risk of having the old traditional teaching methodologies be implemented in the new program. The problem was local mentality and what most of the teaching staff in the Faculty considered being value. In one sentence, the majority of the staff from the establishment of the faculty considered that a good teacher is the one that knows the subject well. Requirements in hiring staff in the public university made impossible bringing new modern thinking and reform oriented people to teach in this Faculty. Thus, change was, and still is to some extent, difficult to happen.

The concern from the very beginning whether the reform was going to produce concrete tangible results was understandable. Copying literally the Canadian or European model in the local circumstances was the weakness. Local capacities to implement this innovation was lacking and the donor support was not perhaps careful enough in addressing this issue, or even more the timeline of project implementation was too short for solving problems of this nature – reforming teaching in the University classroom.

Lack of local ownership and strategy in reform implementation

Regardless of the good will and intention of the international donors to support the Teacher Education reform in Kosovo, there was no

mechanism established to guarantee the sustainability of the structures being created ,after the funding withdrew, and the maintenance and enhancement of quality. Of course the best mechanism would be local ownership and commitment.

Senge (1990) suggests that a vision proceeds success and serves as the overall concept and the compelling force of the organization. Lack of a local strategy and vision, by the Government and University Management for the Faculty of Education enabled the rapid growth of this Faculty which has now turned into an unmanageable organization given the resources made available by the Government. For some people, and their viewpoint, this rapid growth of Faculty was considered a success, without worrying too much about the quality of teaching and employability of graduates.

Because of this particular reason – lack of a proper development strategy –Faculty of Education is only training teachers for pre-primary and primary schools whereas, without thinking long-term and strategically, education of teachers for Upper Secondary Schools was decided to be left with the academic departments. The programs of these departments were far away from meeting national teacher education standards. However, the spirit of compromise seemed to have prevailed at the time when decision about establishing a new faculty was made.

It took 5 years to the Academic Departments to realize that teachers they were training for Upper Secondary Schools were not going to be licensed from the Government, and this means that they would need to review their programs. In order to keep their old tradition of training professionals and to obtain the status of institutions training upper secondary school teachers, these departments decided to launch the program review by duplicating their programs as a result. The final outcome was that they would keep their old programs and offer teacher education programs in addition.

The question is whether or not these departments had the sufficient expertise in the field of teacher education to offer the education/pedagogy component of the program. They always thought they had that expertise, or they underestimated the real importance of education/pedagogy component in teacher education programs. A teacher, for the academic departments, even now needs to know the subject very well and transfer the knowledge to the students. However, the importance of how to transfer the knowledge is minimized. Let alone the fact that it is not only knowledge that we want our future teachers to have – what about skills and competences, and attitudes?

Another defect in the sector is the division between teacher education and educational sciences. The Department of Pedagogy has been developing in parallel to Faculty of Education Master Programs in Social Education and Educational Management. The rationale was rather to create reasons for existing as separate department than responding to a request from senior management and other stakeholders, such as labour market.

Given the nature of programs offered at Department of Pedagogy and Faculty of Education, many of the education courses could be offered jointly, perhaps in more sections if needed. Lack of qualified human resources is a general problem in Kosovo, and lack of qualified teaching staff in University is particularly a concern that needs to be addressed. Utilizing existing resources by avoiding duplication of courses could have contributed significantly to the quality enhancement.

Furthermore, joining forces would enable that the teaching component in the Faculty of Education is supplemented by the educational research that would be boosted by the researchers that the department of Pedagogy possesses. Except educating teachers, Faculty of Education should complete its other part of the mission which is conducting research and guiding the development of the school system.

Being a new Faculty, Faculty of Education did not have a strong influence and powerful voice in the University decision making bodies to raise the voice against these disharmonized actions and development in the field of teacher education and educational sciences. Furthermore, Faculty of Education had not yet had the chance to prove its successes so that it would be granted with more responsibilities. Other made use of this situation. However, this perception was wrong and the issue was not giving more responsibilities but joining forces, sharing responsibilities and rationalizing the use of resources, which are scarce anyway.

The so far unsuccessful attempts of the Faculty of Education to position itself in a better way within University cannot be considered only as a failure of the faculty itself. It is a failure of University to develop a modern Teacher Education system by allowing the fragmented structuring of the bodies in charge of teacher education and educational sciences. It is a failure of the University as an institution towards the society by providing low quality teacher education and educational research.

Where does the international influence and support fit in this context? Is there anything that donors could have influenced to avoid this unplanned and spontaneous development of the Teacher Education in

Kosovo? Certainly yes. International donors could have facilitated the development of a shared vision among local stakeholders for the new Faculty of Education that was being created. Not that the donors were not aware of this need, but it seems that they fell victims of the compromises that were made in mitigating addressing the resistance against the change taking place.

The other problem with the donor influence was that such projects try to limit their influence within the frames and context of the same country providing the support, without looking at what are different options and what is the combination that would best suit the local context. The same situation occurs also with different partnership projects with Western Europe Universities. The model of that single country or institution is attempted to be copied in the local context. There is no single model that fits Kosovo Education system given its challenges and history in the last two decades. The work done by European Commission funded project “Tuning Educational Structures in Europe¹” would be a perfect example of how can different structures be harmonized and still keep their originality.

The system cannot afford the risk to educate lower quality teachers than the ones we already have in schools. Of course, this was not the objective of the international support. If local partners and beneficiaries all had moral purpose in this reform and international donors a clearer strategy and better understanding of local context, results could have been what everyone wanted at the beginning: elimination of disintegrated and disharmonized low quality Teacher Education structures in University of Prishtina.

Conclusions and lessons learned

What is the way forward now? And, how the decision on way forward is going to be made given the history of policy decision making in regards to Teacher Education in Kosovo! Establishment of the Faculty of Education was the beginning but the biggest success in reforming Teacher Education, thanks to international funding and more importantly expertise. Thus, all the stakeholders should do their utmost to build on that so that Kosovo schools have as good teachers as those in Western Europe.

The most important aspect is that University itself should be proactive by having a development strategy. This would mark the end of the short-sighted and uninformed decision making in the past that was not always in the best interest of developing an integrated and full fledged teacher education institution in the only public University in the country.

¹ For more information on Tuning Project: <http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

The evaluation and policy studies culture should be embodied in the institution, and system in general, so that in future decisions regarding the development of Teacher Education are well informed. This would be the best preventive measure for defects in the system that usually takes generations to recover.

Having a shared vision and a development strategy at the institutional level, reflecting the agreed upon vision, would have of course avoided the biggest mistake that University of Prishtina is making in regards to Teacher Education – going back to the old former Yugoslav fashion of offering Teacher Education at more than one Faculty within the same University, with a separate Pedagogy Department as well. All this, without basing their work on common standards and values. The question that policy making bodies will ask at some stage, after getting familiar with a broader picture of Teacher Education or Educational Sciences in wider Europe, is: How can we come to point zero and then be in line with modern development trends in Teacher Education. It is already too late if we do not act now.

Information about the author

The author is lecturer at the Faculty of Education in University of Prishtina, Kosovo, responsible for education courses at the English Program. His research interest is “the shift from prescriptivism to task-based and communicative approach in teaching” in the post-conflict Kosovo, with a special focus on teaching English.

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