KCDE - Mëso Online
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Increasing higher education opportunities through equal access to e-learning and technology

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SUMMARY

The digital rights issue constitutes a new civil right: the right to digital equity; the right to connect to needed resources for all to have access to educational, cultural, and any other recreational events UN (2015). For that reason, disconnecting young people should be understood as an infringement of international law. This situation compels us to advocate not only for access to higher education for all but also for access to online education and digital solutions. Moreover, the use of technology is an integral learning process as it can provide key support to better meet the diverse learning needs of students. However, in Kosovo technology integration and especially the transition to online classes in the past two years has been rather challenging, particularly due to the absence of resources which includes the lack of opportunities for training and professional development on digital education and the lack of technology infrastructure (Morina et al. 2020).

The absence of proper digital infrastructure at both institutional and personal levels may have expanded "learning loss" among students in Kosovo in the past few years, increasing the likelihood that they would fall further behind their peers in the region (Trupia and Madhi 2021). While higher education opportunities may increase through equal access to e-learning and technology, with the hit of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kosovo institutions failed to deliver on its myriad benefits when put into practice (Spitler. A., 2022).

This brief research paper further lays out digital inclusion among university students, as well as identifies challenges to accessibility, connectivity and e-learning in higher education. Additionally, the research addresses the existing needs of marginalized groups in accessing, participating, and completing higher education and the impact of technology, with a special focus on gender perspective.

Increasing higher education opportunities through equal access to e-learning and technology

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (the "Constitution") defines the Republic of Kosovo as an independent, sovereign, democratic, unique and indivisible state based upon the principles of equality and respect for the rights and freedoms of all individuals, as well as protection of the rights of and participation by all communities. Inclusion is one of the key principles in the education system through which institutions promote basic human rights. Access to education is a basic human right that works to alleviate poverty, level inequalities, and ensure sustainable development. As such, this right is universal. It means that all people, without distinction on any basis, are holders of the right to access education. Additionally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as a key instrument for human rights, proclaims free basic education for all. In the spirit of this Declaration, Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges member states, inter alia, to make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by all appropriate means; take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and reduction of drop-out rate or missing out in education. Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are one of the most vulnerable groups and their education requires special measures to ensure inclusion and appropriate education quality.

Missing out on education has serious repercussions. The longer students are out of school, the more likely they are to drop out of school or delay their return. This is due to numerous factors, including: "a) financial constraints and pressure to take up employment, b)household chores, c) childcare, especially when parents or caregivers are ill or have passed away, d) early and forced marriage and/or early and unintended pregnancy" (UN, 2020). In Kosovo, marginalized communities such as Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are mainly affected by financial constraints; while, girls are particularly vulnerable to the last factor. This means that even in the digital age of education, the rights of marginalized groups in Kosovo are again disregarded.

Evidence from low-and middle-income countries shows that parents give girls access to digital technology at a later age than their male peers and that their access is "more curtailed or surveilled" (Livingstone, S. et al., 2017). More men than women have access to the internet in all regions of the world. Consequently, there is no surprise that girls are 25 percent less likely than boys to know how to leverage technology for basic purposes such as enrolling in e-learning or using technology for education (UNESCO,2020). In other words, in the context of e-learning, the use of digital solutions can further deepen the gender gap in educational attainment if there are no projects supporting and ensuring equal rights and access. According to UNESCO, 2020; Sustainable Development Goal 5, equality in education means equal empowerment during the entire education and its forms.

According to the UN (2015) all should promote and recognize the right to digital equity as a civil right; the right to connect to needed resources for all to have access to educational, cultural, and other recreational events. Therefore, disconnecting young people should be understood as an infringement of international law. This situation compels us to advocate not only for access to higher education for all but also for access to online education. These fundamental issues should be solved in order to expand educational opportunities.

BRIEF
SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

According to Education Statistics in Kosovo (2020/21), there are 23 HEIs in Kosovo, of which nine (9) are public universities and 14 are private colleges, with a total of about 82 thousand students and five (5) thousand academic staff. The total number of students in university education was 95 335, of which in public universities were 54 753 students, or expressed in percentage, 57.4%, while in private colleges were 40 582 students or 42.6% (ASK, 2022).

In public universities 1 computer is available for 60 students. Both public and private HEIs in Kosovo have been connected through the commercial network (with poor speed and security in terms of quality for research) and have paid for broadband services that do not meet institutions needs (KREN, 2022). Kosovo lacked hardware infrastructure, systematized, and dedicated technical support for HEIs, and a network connecting HEIs. As a result, in 2019, the Kosovo Digital Economy (KODE) project was supported by the International Development Association (IDA) and implemented within the Ministry of Economy (ME) enabling the establishment of the National Network for Research and Education of Kosovo/Kosovo Research and Education Network (KREN). To date, 16 HEIs have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Economy (on KRENS's behalf) for the use of KREN's services and infrastructure, while with other three (3) HEIs, KREN has formed cooperation (KREN, 2022).

Furthermore, MESTI has initiated and drafted a strategic plan on the Digitalization of Education, which represents one of the five main pillars of Kosovo's Education Strategy 2021 – 2026 (KES 2021/26). KES also includes measures to improve services for students as well as measures to enhance inclusion and quality of education for members of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. KES has specified the "Development and use of digital teaching materials in order to increase the quality of teaching and learning" and emphasized the need for technology integration to better meet the diverse learning needs of students. However, in Kosovo technology integration and especially the transition to online classes in the past two years has been rather challenging, particularly due to the absence of resources which includes the lack of infrastructure and competence gap. A recent study developed by ETEA (2021) states that only 30 percent of graduated education students attained digital and technological skills during their higher education at the Faculty of Education. This creates barriers to performing digital learning activities and explores hybrid educational opportunities presented by new technologies.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this paper was to further investigate digital inclusion among university students, as well as identify challenges to accessibility, connectivity and e-learning in higher education. Additionally, the research addressed the existing needs of marginalized groups in accessing, participating, and completing higher education and the impact of technology, with a special focus on gender perspective.
Participants of the study were selected among public and private university students who are currently enrolling in undergraduate or graduate studies. Participants were subject to convenient accessibility and were willing to participate in the research study in their own time without remuneration or other compensation.

Participants represented students from the majority and non-majority communities. Around 70 percent of participants self-identified as women, and 30 percent self-identified as men; the average age of participants is 23 years old.
The majority of student participants or a bit over 60 percent of participants are enrolled in public higher education institutions, while almost 40 percent in private higher education institutions. From the total, 77.5 percent represent undergraduate level while 22.5 percent represent graduate (masters) level of higher education in Kosovo.

**Tab.1. Demographics Characteristics of Participants**
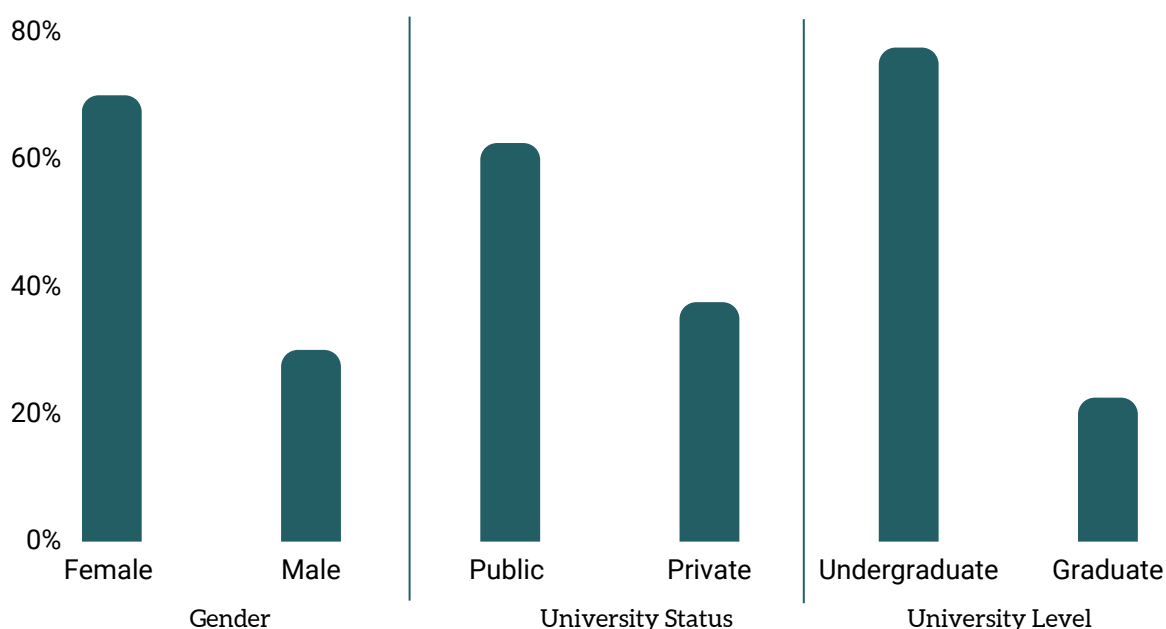
All respondents think that every student should have access to a laptop/computer when enrolling in higher education. They state that the device would help them during their studies for multiple purposes, including preparation of seminars, assignments, projects, finding adequate sources for their thesis research, practical work and so on. Moreover, students state that this will also enable them to have access to online books, online libraries and other e-resources. According to them, digital devices would greatly facilitate their studies, due to a more efficient mode of study and less use of mechanical methods of studying and searching.

When asked how the number of absentees and dropouts in higher education can be reduced, most relate this to the prospects of higher education and its environment. According to respondents, absentees and dropout rates are closely related to factors such as economic status and well-being, internship and job prospects, access to resources, class/education interactiveness and inclusion, and awareness. Roughly 40 percent of student participants in this study list economic and job perspective-related factors to absenteeism and dropouts. While, the majority of them or about 60 percent think that the number of absentees and dropouts in higher education be reduced by providing a more student-centered, interactive teaching environment, including here technology-supported learning and flexibility.

When asked whether students are ready to transition to a more digital and online learning environment, most of them rated their readiness to such a transition above 3 points, meaning that they feel somehow ready or ready for such an environment. Ten percent state that they are not at all ready for an online learning environment. This can be directly related to access to technology. As the follow up question asks whether students do have access to technology, and the forms that they might have access to technology.

**Tab. 2. Readiness to participate in e-learning (1 - lowest; 5 highest)**
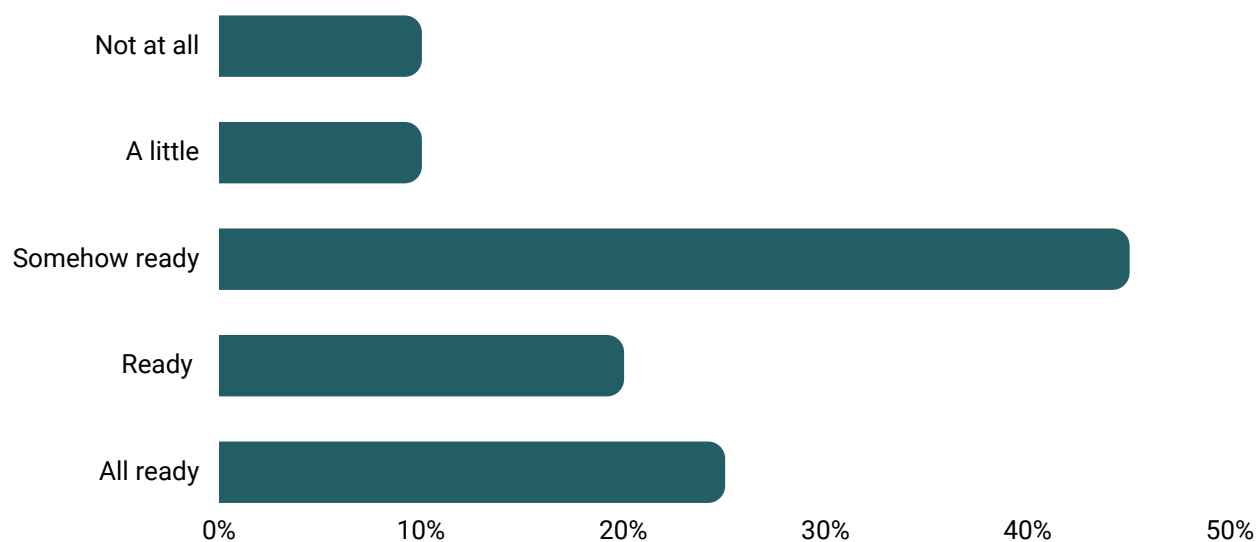
Most of the respondents stated that they have their own laptops or have a computer at home. While again about 20 percent stated that they do now have access to a laptop, computer at home, or access to their University's computer lab. This can mirror the 20 percent of those also not ready to participate in e-learning.

Tab. 3., Access to technology
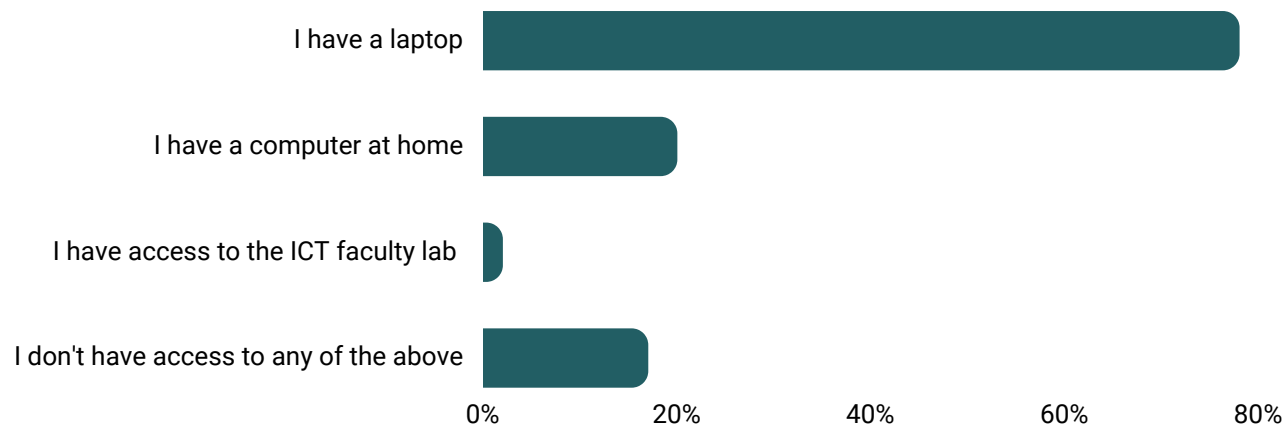
The majority of respondents state the need for improvement in terms of equity and inclusion in higher education in regard to gender, ethnicity, and even age. Less than half of them think that the situation is improving or is about right. A great number of respondents, about 30 percent, however, do remain neutral in giving an opinion about the level of equity and inclusion in higher education.

Tab. 4. Digital integration and its effect in inclusion in higher education
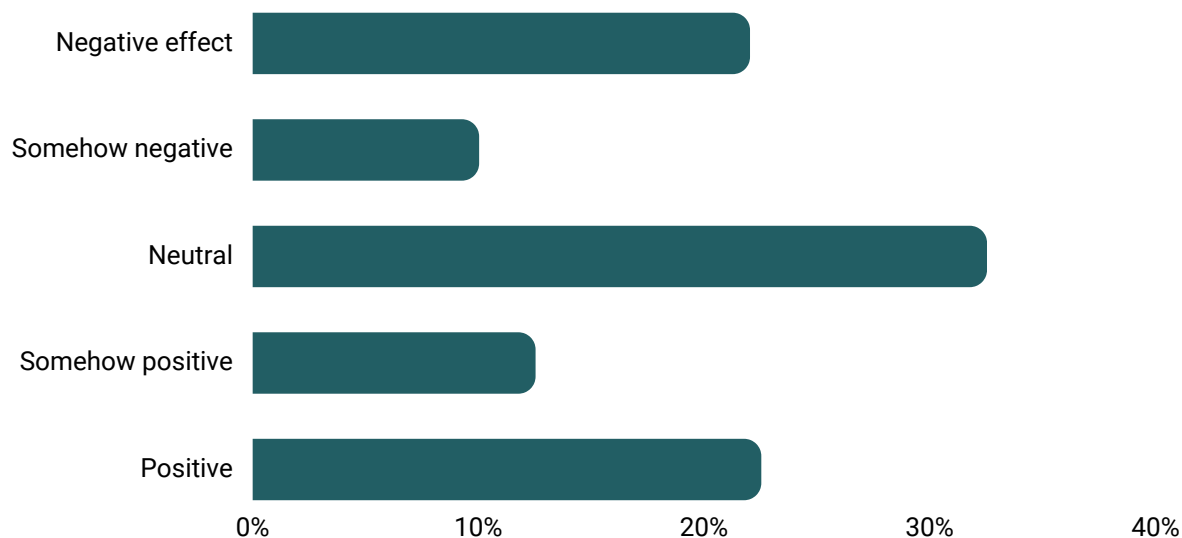
Responses regarding digital integration and its effect in inclusive higher education are scattered. The same number of respondents that think that digital integration has been affected negatively, have also stated that it has a positive effect (with a 2 point difference). However, a good majority do remain undecided on technologies impact in inclusion, which as a result calls for more investigation (probably after specific digital integration interventions).

According to our respondents, about 40 percent of them think that families of different races, ethnicities or cultures perceive our University environment as positive and inclusive. About a quarter of them or 28 percent think that the higher education environment is perceived negatively, due to lack of inclusion in higher education, while 35 percent do not know or have not answered on how families of different races, ethnicities or cultures perceive university environments.

A number of respondents (about 25 percent) state that there are awareness-raising campaigns, shared spaces/activities for inclusion and interaction, and policy initiatives that can serve as mechanisms or systems to help connect and reduce inequalities in education. However, the remaining answers either think that there is no such system in place or don't know of any.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Student respondents state that a more digital integrated higher education system and environment would greatly facilitate their studies, enabling efficiency and moving on from mechanical focused learning. A more digital environment can in turn develop digital skills and enable students to attain jobs after graduation. According to respondents, absenteeism and dropout rates are closely related to factors such as economic status and wellbeing, internship and job prospects, access to resources, class/education interactiveness and inclusion, and awareness. Because of a lack of digital environment and access to technology, most of the students feel reluctant or only somehow ready for e-learning.

The majority of respondents state the need for improvement in terms of equity and inclusion in higher education in regard to gender, ethnicity, and even age. A good majority do remain undecided on technologies impact in inclusion, which as a result calls for more investigation (probably after specific digital integration interventions). A number of respondents state that there are awareness-raising campaigns, shared spaces/activities for inclusion and interaction, and policy initiatives that can serve as mechanisms or systems to help connect and reduce inequalities in education.

While the findings of this research are important, there are, however, a couple of limitations that should be considered for further research. First, the research gap for the link of digital integration in education and inclusion in Kosovo was huge. Also, the small sample size is relatively small and may devalue the statistical test. Therefore, a research study with a bigger sample with a quantitative paradigm would complement the literature regarding increased higher education opportunities through equal access to e-learning and technology. In addition, the sample did not include a sufficient number of students who represent vulnerable groups with highest dropout rates. As the number of such students is significant in the overall population, we recommend a research study sampling this particular group of students. Moreover, the perspective of professors is especially important when determining the effectiveness of equal access to e-learning and technology in increasing higher education opportunities.

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