



The Impact of ICT Training on Employment, Education, and Gender Inclusivity in Kosovo

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Executive Summary

In recent years, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has emerged as a vital driver of economic growth, innovation, and employment worldwide. The need for ICT-related skills has increased because of the industry's growing integration of digital tools into their operations. This has both created new opportunities and exacerbated skill gaps. For Kosovo, a young nation with consistently high youth unemployment, this dynamic is especially relevant. Although ICT training programs have been welcomed as a solution to this problem, research is still ongoing to determine their efficacy and long-term effects on gender gaps, academic career paths, and employment outcomes.

With a particular focus on Kosovo, the labour market is characterized by a substantial mismatch between skills supply and industry demands. Traditional academic institutions often struggle to keep up with the rapidly changing digital landscape. In response, a lot of training initiatives, including accredited long-year programs, as well as short-term courses and modules, have emerged to bridge this gap.

This study aims to evaluate the impact of ICT training programs on three key dimensions, their effectiveness in facilitating entry into the labour market; their influence on academic career decisions; and their role in addressing gender disparities in ICT participation. Through a combination of desk research and qualitative interviews with stakeholders, including university faculties, training program managers, government representatives, and students and youth who were exposed to ICT trainings at early age, we find that ICT training programs in Kosovo play a crucial role in shaping employment outcomes and academic choices while also contributing to gender inclusivity.

Accredited long-year programs show a strong positive correlation with job placement, particularly due to their alignment with industry needs. Early exposure to ICT has had mixed effects, while helping students gain confidence and technical skills, in some cases, it has created overconfidence. Thus, diminishing engagement of students in higher education, as they may often take lessons for granted. However, women-focused initiatives have increased female participation in ICT – both education and labour market, though workplace biases and societal norms still pose barriers. Therefore, sustained collaboration between training providers, academic institutions, and government bodies is essential to ensure that ICT education remains relevant, adaptable, and capable of addressing long term challenges such as brain drain and skill mismatches.

To further elaborate on the topic, the present study is organized in four main sections. First section provides a background on ICT landscape in Kosovo. Second section introduces the methodological choice of this study. Third section deepens in analysis of secondary data and stakeholder interviews. The fourth section provides recommendations and conclusion. This study, however, opens with an illustrative table of the overall key findings.

Key Findings

Table 1: Main findings

Theme

Key Findings

Effectiveness of Long-Year Accredited programs

- Over 80% of graduates from two-year programs offered by Private Providers, secure jobs due to a strong focus on practical skills and industry alignment.
 - Curricula are updated every 6 months to align with industry needs, emphasizing practical skills.
-

Short-Term Training Programs

- Short-term trainings provide crucial knowledge but often lack depth for long-term career progression.
 - They are ideal as initial exposure to ICT.
-

Early Exposure to ICT

- Early exposure increases technical skills and confidence, guiding career choices towards ICT.
 - Early training influences academic aspirations, with some students favouring immediate employment over further studies.
 - Risk of overconfidence leading to disengagement.
-

Gender Disparities in ICT Training

- Targeted initiatives have significantly improved female participation, with ratios nearing parity in some programs.
 - Persistent workplace biases and stereotypes remain.
-

Gender Disparities in ICT Training

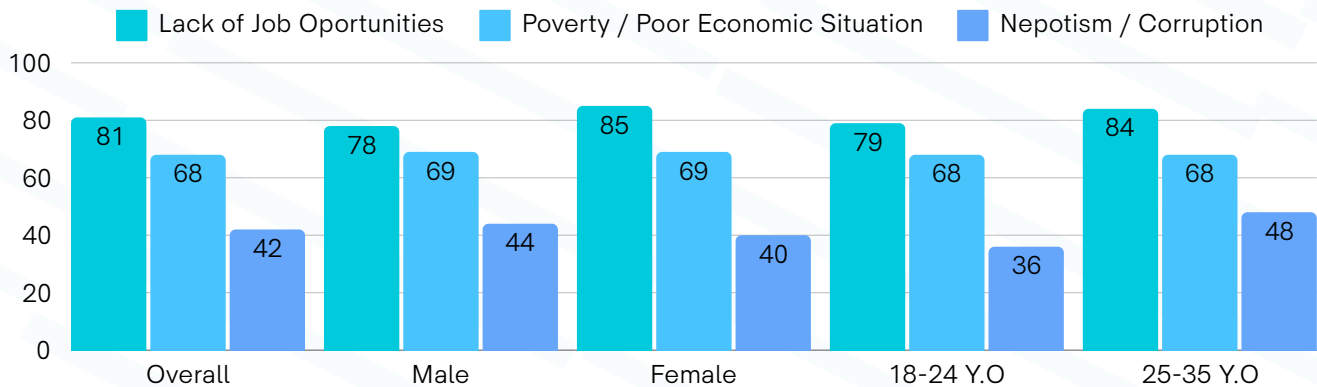
- Collaborative efforts between the government and international organizations have been crucial.
- Sustainability and policy agility are key challenges.

Background

The population of Kosovo is significantly younger than many other European countries, with an average age of 34.8 years (Prime Minister Office, 2024). While a young population can be an asset to a country, a mismatch between the supply of young people and the demand for their skills can pose significant economic challenges, leading to various social and economic ramifications for the country. In Kosovo, 72% of individuals aged 15 to 29 years, experience horizontal mismatch, a disparity that declines over time. This mismatch is more prevalent among men, with 61% affected, compared to 39% of women (Gap Institute, 2020).

Moreover, the unemployment rate in Kosovo as of 2023 is roughly 20%, with differences according to age, gender, and skill level. Youth unemployment remains a critical issue, particularly for individuals aged 15-24, where the rate is among the highest in Europe. The difficulty is exacerbated by the gender disparity in the workforce, as just 20% of women have jobs (World Bank Group, 2023).

Figure 1: Top three challenges of young people in Kosovo, by gender and age



Source (UNDP, 2021), adapted by author.

In other words, employability is the main concern among youth. As we can see in Figure 1, lack of job opportunities is the most significant challenge faced by young people in Kosovo. This issue is particularly prevalent among young women, with a higher percentage of them reporting it compared to young men.

However, in line with its progressive philosophy, Kosovo adopted digital technology rapidly. ICT is seen as essential to many different types of economic activity, essential to the creation and maintaining of global business connections, essential to social cohesiveness, and essential to the spread of knowledge across society.

Almost everyone in the country has access to high-speed internet, and daily usage in 2020 was 93%, far higher than the 80% average for the EU (Eurostat, 2024). This extensive internet coverage has fostered an attractive environment for the development of the ICT sector in Kosovo. In general, Kosovo's ICT sector represents a vibrant economic sector creating many jobs, making up an important part of the GDP between 8% and 11% over the past ten years (European Commission, 2018). Therefore, given the high unemployment rate in Kosovo, particularly among youth, ICT training is seen as a bypass to create jobs and foster academic achievement.

Additionally, research has shown varying impacts of ICT on student outcomes depending on the context. Using PISA 2018 data found a negative relationship between ICT use for learning and student performance, with the effect being more pronounced in developing countries, suggesting that ICT integration may require careful contextual consideration. (Vargas-Montoya, Gimenez, & Fernandez-Gutierrez, 2023). On the other hand, access to ICT equipment and proper infrastructure is crucial for improving educational outcomes, particularly in subjects like mathematics, reading, and science. From PISA 2022 it is reported that schools with better ICT infrastructure reported significantly higher student performance (World Bank, 2024). On a different note, ICT training has the power to dramatically affect employment, especially for women. ICT training initiatives, such as tech courses and coding boot camps, have shown potential in improving women's employment (UNDP, 2022).

Finally, during the past few years, there has been an exponential increase in the number of girls in engineering and computer science departments in public universities. At the University of Pristina, 50.7% of computer science students and 55.9% of computer engineering students were female in 2021–2022, up from 61.8% in the previous year. This marks a major shift compared to ten years ago, when only 28.2% of computer engineering students were women, with the number dropping to 26.8% the following year, (University of Pristina, 2023). Moreover, while the sources don't directly analyse the impact of increased participation of women in ICT study programs and extracurricular ICT training on women's employability, they suggest that by increasing women's representation in a growing and high-demand field like ICT, targeted training programs could contribute to reducing gender gaps in the labour market (Institute For Free Market Economy, 2023).

The ICT Landscape in Kosova

For years, different donors in collaboration with ICT training providers have launched several key initiatives to equip youth with digital skills that would potentially reduce the gap in the labour market.

- Digital Skills for All (DS4A) The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in collaboration with RIT Kosova and the Ministry of Local Government and Administration, launched the Digital Skills for All initiative. This program aims to equip young people aged 18-29 with marketable digital skills through intensive boot-camps in areas such as mobile application development, web development, data engineering, networking, digital marketing, and digital design.
- In 2019, Cactus Education, in partnership with USAID and other local organizations, initiated the “Partnership for Impact in ICT” project. This three-year program focused on providing professional training and internships in ICT, aiming to bridge the skills gap in the local job market.
- In 2022, UNDP and GIZ launched the Digital Skills Programme, aimed at supporting young jobseekers in developing employment-ready programming skills. The program included training boot-camps in programming, networking, design, and digital marketing, with a special focus on women, non-majority communities, and persons with disabilities.
- ICT for Kosovo’s Growth Project aims to bridge the skills gap between digital and business in a sustainable manner that meets market demands. Among others, the main beneficiaries are the ICT workforce.

In addition to the key initiatives by donors, several non-profit non-governmental organizations, private providers, and universities are leading ICT training, playing a crucial role in bridging the skills gap.

- The Innovation Centre Kosova (ICK) is a centre that aims to link the business sector, start-up ecosystem, and the ICT training programs with the development component. It does this by emphasising the creation of new job prospects that are future-proofed and based on the exchange of technology and knowledge.
- STIKK aims to help create a better ICT business environment by improving standards and educational opportunities, among others.
- Cactus Education aims to prepare and place students in the workforce as quickly as possible by educating them for both domestic and global employment markets. This is accomplished by giving the students access to a top-notch education and level of competence through ongoing innovation, the application of global standards, and the newest developments in technology.
- Digital School, JCoders, Beetroot Academy, are private companies that aim to train youth ranging from 7 to 18 years old in technology and programming. Their focus lies in teaching programming logic and STEM.
- BONEVET, PEN, Ipko Foundation, KCDE, and a few other NGOs also focus their efforts on digital skill enhancement projects by providing space for children and youth to attain digital skills through a variety of enrichment programs.

Methodology

This research study employs a qualitative design to explore the impact of ICT training programs on youth employment, academic career, and gender disparities in Kosova. Apart from the desk research, including articles and publications reviews, the approach focuses on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, providing a detailed understanding of the issues at hand.

Data Collection

Data were collected through ten semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders, including university faculties, ICT training program managers, government representatives, and students who were exposed to early ICT trainings. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a broader representation and different perspectives. All interviews were conducted in Albanian and transcribed verbatim to maintain accuracy.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within the interview data. This process was characterised by following steps:

- Familiarization: Reading and re-reading all the transcripts of interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.
- Coding: Generating and highlighting initial codes to highlight key concepts and recurring themes.
- Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes, such as the impact of ICT training on academic career development and/or the role in accessing the labour market, the role of government, and finally, gender-specific outcomes.
- Analysis: Critically reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and alignment with research objectives.

Ethical Consideration

To protect anonymity and confidentiality of participants, only what they represent is mentioned, and identifying details were omitted from the report. Informed consent was obtained before interviews, and participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and their rights to withdraw at any time.

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on qualitative data. While rich in detail, may not be generalizable to all contexts. Additionally, the findings are influenced by the perspectives of the selected participants and may not fully capture the experiences of all stakeholders involved in ICT training in Kosova.

Analysis

ICT training programs have demonstrated plenty of promise in tackling important issues including gender inequality, skill mismatches, and youth unemployment. Alongside formal education institutions, private providers and several NGOs offer ICT training and enrichment programs, allowing youth to be introduced to the ICT world from a young age. The diverse effects of these trainings are clarified by this thematic analysis. Mainly, by exploring themes mentioned above, this analysis aims to offer detailed insights into the impact and limitations of ICT training for those who were exposed at an early stage in employment prospects, its impact on academic path, as well as its impact on gender disparities.

Impact of ICT training programs on joining the labour market

ICT training programs have demonstrated considerable effectiveness in preparing young people for employment. Notably, long-year programs, such as those offered by private education institutions (accredited by the National Qualifications Authority and licensed by the Ministry of Education), have reported that over 80% of their graduates secure jobs due to the practical and industry-aligned nature of the training. This effective result is strongly related to how they review their curriculum. They follow a structured process for curriculum preparation, aligning with accreditation agency requirements to revise programs every six months. A dedicated working group comprising company owners, team leaders, STIKK members, and faculty, assesses market needs for the next 2-3 months. This ensures that curricula remain up to date with industry trends, aiming to equip graduates with relevant skills for the coming three years. In contrast, universities struggle to adapt their curricula at the same pace. Structural and bureaucratic constraints often prevent frequent updates to academic programs.

On the other hand, while university graduates possess a strong theoretical foundation, they often require an additional 6 to 12 months of practical training before becoming fully operational in the labour market. Employers highlighted that.

"Private training providers constantly update their curricula according to market needs, while in universities, changes occur much more slowly and often remain theoretical" – Participant Response.

Based on this, while universities provide a strong theoretical foundation, private training institutions are more agile in responding to labour market needs.

Table 2 provides a clear view of these differences.

Aspects	Private Training Providers	Universities
Curriculum Updates	Every 6 months, aligned with industry needs	Infrequent updates due to bureaucratic constraints
Practical Training	Hands-on projects, real-world applications	Theoretical focus, minimal practical exposure
Job Readiness	Graduates enter workforce immediately	Graduates require 6-12 months of additional training
Flexibility	Rapid adaptation to labour market demands	Rigid structure, slow to implement changes
Employer Preference	Strong preference for industry-aligned skills	Recognized for foundational knowledge but lacks practical experience

Table 2: Comparison of Curriculum Adaptation: Private Training Providers vs. Universities

Furthermore, short-term training initiatives also play a crucial role, providing participants with foundational skills necessary for immediate employment. They are seen as extremely appropriate and suitable for paving the academic path or facilitating employment, but being short, continuity and consistency in learning remains essential for success. Participants in the interviews frequently highlighted that short-term training programs are valuable for gaining a foothold in the industry.

"These programs teach you just enough to get started, but not enough to grow consistently without additional learning." – Participant Response.

This underscores the importance of continued skill development beyond initial training. Moreover, the emphasis on practical skills over formal qualifications reflects a shift in labour market dynamics, where demonstrable competencies are increasingly prioritized over academic credentials.

"Employers care more about what you can do than what degree you hold. Portfolios and hands-on projects make the difference." – Participant Response.

Additionally, several interviewees emphasized the impact of early-stage ICT training in shaping career trajectories. Short-term courses or modules, often taken at a young age, were not only instrumental in developing technical skills but also served as stepping stones toward internships and, in some cases, entrepreneurship. Respondents shared their experience of attending a foundational training program while in high school, which led to securing an internship at local tech companies. This initial exposure allowed them to build a network, gain real-world experience, and eventually establish their startup.

"If I hadn't started with those short training sessions early on, I wouldn't have landed my first internship. That experience gave me the confidence and practical skills to start my start-up." – Participant Response.

To conclude, these observations emphasise the dual function of ICT training, which is to promote a culture of self-learning, creativity, and entrepreneurship while simultaneously ensuring employability. The ability to consistently adapt, starting from early training experiences, seems to be an important factor in determining long-term professional success in a labour market that is changing quickly.

Influence on Academic Career Paths

Early exposure to ICT has a dual effect on academic trajectories. On the one hand, it helps shape academic and career aspirations, encouraging participants to pursue higher education in ICT-related fields. On the other hand, it may discourage further academic engagement, as individuals prioritize employment over academic advancement. Some interviewees described how early training fostered technical expertise that led directly to employment, but this focus on work often reduced motivation to pursue advanced education.

"When [one] starts working at an early age, the need for a master's or PhD diminishes. One is already earning, so the incentive to return to academia fades." – Participant Response.

Moreover, faculty members raised concerns about how early ICT training can sometimes lead to a misalignment between student expectations and academic engagement. Several professors observed that students who did undergo prior ICT training before entering university often demonstrated stronger initial technical skills. However, this early advantage sometimes led to a sense of overconfidence, where students felt they already knew the material and became disengaged in lectures. This phenomenon can result in a gap between practical proficiency and the broader, theory-based education that universities offer.

"Some students who receive early training, due to the skills they acquire early on, often lose focus in their studies". – Participant Response

"Students who were exposed to ICT field at an early age are one step ahead of their peers and often compare everything they learn at university with what they have learned in training". – Participant Response

This causes diminishing attention on their studies, thinking they already have acquired the knowledge they need. But over time, those who weren't exposed to early ICT trainings and study actively manage to catch up and often surpass. Ultimately, the findings suggest that a structured balance is necessary, where early ICT training complements rather than replaces academic education. Universities and training providers could collaborate to design pathways that integrate both structured learning and hands-on experience, ensuring students develop a well-rounded foundation.

Addressing Gender Disparities

ICT training programs have played a transformative role in reducing gender disparities in the field. Targeted initiatives, especially those designed for women have successfully increased female participation in ICT, shifting the gender ratio significantly over the past decade. In some programs, the numbers have even approached parity, demonstrating the value of focused interventions.

"In some programs, the number of girls has nearly matched that of boys, showing that investing in women-focused programs has a tangible effect". – Participant Response

Moreover, as several interviewees noted, significant barriers remain, particularly in the realms of workplace retention and career progression. Gender stereotypes and biases persist in both training environments and professional settings.

"When a male trainee makes a mistake, he's encouraged to try again. When it's a woman, the task might be reassigned altogether." – Participant Response.

This discrepancy not only undermines confidence but also limits women's opportunities for learning and growth. Moreover, women encounter prejudices that negatively affect their motivation to explore more technical fields and advance in their careers. Additionally, societal expectations further compound these issues. Despite growing awareness, traditional views still influence career choices.

"Parents still tend to steer their daughters toward traditionally 'feminine' fields, even when they show strong aptitude for technology." – Participant Response.

However, on a more positive note, many interviews highlighted that early ICT training not only equips women with technical skills but also instils a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy. Several female trainees shared experiences of how early exposure helped them secure internships and job opportunities, thereby challenging the narrative that ICT is predominantly a male domain.

"Starting early gave me the confidence and the practical know-how that made employers take notice. It was the first step toward my tech career." – Participant Response.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, the gender ratio in ICT training has undergone a remarkable transformation. Initially, male participation dominated with ratios often around 70:30 in favour of men. However, targeted initiatives and women-focused programs have gradually shifted this balance, with many centres now reporting ratios as close as 50:50. This notable change underscores the effectiveness of focused interventions in creating more inclusive learning environments and challenging longstanding gender stereotypes in the tech field. Furthermore, government initiatives, particularly those led by the Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, have provided additional support through targeted programs and financial incentives, further promoting gender inclusivity in ICT training. However, findings from interviews indicate that some incentive programs, particularly scholarships aimed at increasing female participation, are not always yielding the intended results. Several women have been found to register for programs solely to access financial aid, without actively attending or engaging in the training. This highlights the need for stricter monitoring mechanisms and accountability measures to ensure that such initiatives effectively serve their purpose—genuinely empowering women with ICT skills rather than becoming a means for financial gain without participation. Addressing these challenges will be crucial in refining gender-focused initiatives and maximizing their impact.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study's findings highlight the transformative potential of ICT training programs in Kosovo, especially in tackling youth unemployment and addressing gender disparities. The research emphasizes that accredited two-year programs, designed with practical, up-to-date curricula revised every six months, play an important role in preparing young people for the job market. While traditional university programs offer a strong theoretical foundation, their bureaucratic processes often mean that graduates need to supplement their learning with additional hands-on training. In contrast, the responsive nature of these ICT courses means that participants gain immediately relevant skills that are directly aligned with current market needs.

Short-term ICT courses, meanwhile, serve as a valuable introduction to basic skills and offer initial exposure to the field. However, they sometimes fall short when it comes to providing the comprehensive training necessary for long-term career development. Early exposure to ICT not only sparks interest in technology-related careers but also influences academic behavior, boosting confidence and easing the transition into the labor market. At the same time, there is a risk that this early engagement might lead some students to leave formal academic settings prematurely, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that encourages continued academic growth.

Another significant aspect of the study is the progress made toward gender inclusivity. Targeted initiatives have successfully increased female participation in ICT training programs, with some programs almost reaching gender parity. Nevertheless, stereotypes and workplace biases still present challenges that need to be addressed to achieve full gender equity in the sector.

Overall, while ICT training has already made meaningful contributions toward reducing youth unemployment and promoting gender inclusivity, there is a clear need for a more integrated and systemic approach. A collaborative effort among academic institutions, private training providers, and government agencies is essential to create a sustainable ecosystem that not only meets current labor market demands but also helps stem the tide of brain drain.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and long-term impact of ICT training programs in Kosovo:

1. Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships:

- a. Encourage partnerships between universities and training providers to co-develop curricula that combine robust theoretical foundations with practical, hands-on experiences.
- b. Establish a formal advisory board comprising industry leaders, academics, and government representatives to ensure curricula remain current and relevant.

2. Expand Training Initiatives:

- a. Develop modular training programs that allow participants to progress from introductory short courses to more in-depth, specialized training, ensuring continuous skill development.
- b. Create bridging initiatives that help short-term training graduates transition into longer-term programs or accredited courses.

3. Promote Gender Equality in ICT:

- a. Increase financial and mentorship support specifically for young women through scholarships, mentorship programs, and targeted outreach campaigns.
- b. Collaborate with employers to implement training on gender sensitivity and create policies that promote inclusive work environments.
- c. Government initiatives and scholarships should be monitored if they are strictly implemented.
- d. Advocate for government policies that support agile updates to academic and training curricula, reducing bureaucratic delays.

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