



Examination policy in universities in B&H: Testing for discrimination - Case for reforms?

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REMARKS

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A FULL TEXT OF THIS REPORT IS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The development of a country is based fundamentally on the will of people who have the necessary knowledge and skills, or more precisely, on the human capital of a country. Human capital is first and foremost created through the educational system, and importantly through higher education in the universities. It is difficult to imagine progress of a country in the modern world without people who have the necessary skills and knowledge vital in bridging the already wide technological gap relative to developed countries.

For these reasons it is clear that education, and above all, higher education is one of the most vital priorities in the reform process in B&H. In the course of 2004, the Council of Ministers adopted the Medium Term Development Strategy for the period of 2004 to 2007 in which a section is devoted to education reform. In relation to higher education, one of the first priorities set was the adoption of the Higher Education Framework Legislation on the state level. As this law was not adopted, and remains unclear when it will be, it seems that essential higher education reform in B&H has been stopped short in its first and vital steps.

In this study we pose one simple question – does this really have to be the case?

In this study, our answer to that question is negative. Some of the key reforms to the higher education system in B&H that have the most effect on the improvement in quality of studies can and have to be conducted through existing legislation. Not passing the Higher Education Framework Legislation must not be an excuse for stopping the vital reform process in higher education. Stopping these reforms means putting at risk the long-term development of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and with that its political and economic stability, in our opinion. For the bringing of some key reforms in higher education, the existing legislation provides enough room for fairly radical changes for the better. What is needed is the will to start that process.

To date there have been many arguments made for the urgent reform of higher education in universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this study we endeavor to provide one more argument that has rarely been mentioned in the context of discussion about higher education reform in B&H, and about which there has been little research, analysis or discussion. This argument is one of human rights, primarily the protection of students against discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, or some other personal characteristics. This argument seems to be of particular significance in B&H in which the European Declaration of Human Rights is an integral part of the B&H constitutions (Dayton Accords).

In that context, this study endeavors to establish to what degree the existing assessment/examination policy is subject to (un)purposeful discrimination against students on the basis of their personal characteristics, primarily ethnicity and gender. A positive finding in this enquiry would be yet another reason for urgent reform in what is a very important aspect of higher education reform in B&H. In this study we have conducted an analysis of existing legislation that regulates the area of student assessment/examination policy, and a review of standard practices in other countries, primarily those in the European Union.

This study has resulted in key recommendations about the ways in which the current student assessment/examination policy should be changed to be in accordance with standard world practices and the stop discrimination toward students in grading on the basis of their personal characteristics, primarily ethnicity and gender.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study we conducted a research which was consisted of two parts-desk study and empirical research/survey of students.

In the framework of the study we made a review of the current legislation that regulates the field of organization of examinations and student assessment. The conducted review included the following:

1. Current Legislation of Higher Education in B&H
2. Student assessment/Examination policies at B&H universities
3. Conducted evaluations and reports
4. Draft of the Framework Law on Higher Education in B&H
5. Declarations on High Educations
6. Student Assessment/Examination policies in the EU

In the framework of empirical research we conducted a survey of students in the three largest universities in B&H, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar University.. The overall design of empirical research required The overall design required that at each of the three universities we have a sample of between 30 and 50 students, members of numeric majority and minority ethnicities, with as many subjects and faculties as possible.

The basic approach was that for a set number of subjects we compare the grades of students depending on whether they are the same ethnicity or sex as the professor in the subject. If there is a statistically significant difference in the distribution of student grades, then we can conclude that there exists some systematic factor that leads to this difference. Under the conditions that these differences prove, even where all other relevant factors are controlled for, it is justifiable to assume that this systematic factor is in fact the bias of the professor in grading students depending on their ethnicity or sex, or discrimination in other words.

We planned to conduct this research by using the student record archives where all student grades are recorded, however we have met with the refusal of a significant number of faculties in allowing access to their archives. Even though we explained and guaranteed that we are not interested in the identities of students and professors that head subjects, we were not allowed access as it was considered a violation of the right to privacy and protection of personal data.

For this reason, the only option left to us was to obtain this information through a survey of students. The first problem we faced in Banjaluka and Mostar was difficulty in finding at least 30 students from one faculty, in the same subject that are members of numeric ethnic minorities. It was somewhat easier in Sarajevo where at several faculties (not more than 3) we

were able to find an adequate number of Serb and Croat respondents from a set number of subjects after great effort from interviewers.

In the end, having in mind all methodological limitations and available resources and timelines, we had to settle for a convenient quota sample of students. For the purpose of this study analysis we made a survey of 178 students from 3 faculties of the University of Sarajevo. We considered not more than 26 subjects for which we had sufficient number of students of all ethnicities and sex for a comparison of distribution of grades.

A collection of all data on students was conducted with the assistance of a specially designed questionnaire and use of face-to-face interviews.

Following is a description of findings and recommendation.

Main findings

1. Among the total 26 courses considered from 3 different faculties of the University of Sarajevo, we found a statistically significant effect of the professor and student ethnicity in 11 subjects, while the effect of gender was confirmed in 10 different subjects.
2. Of all 26 observed subjects, both these effects were confirmed in 10 subjects.
3. In a total of 6 subjects, the effect of gender or ethnicity was confirmed on the average grade (on verbal or written part of exam).
4. This means that this study confirmed the existence of a number of direct or indirect indicators of the existence of discrimination in the grading of students on the basis of their ethnicity or gender.
5. Students in B&H consider that the manner of organizing exams and corruption in the enrolment process are two of the most important issues facing their faculties currently.
6. Three-quarters of students interviewed report that they are somewhat satisfied with their course of study (73.6%).
7. Students generally consider that written and verbal examination methods are equally objective and equally fair to the student in the prevailing circumstances; although students of the University of Sarajevo express a preference toward written examinations.
8. In relation to preferred forms of evaluation, comparing one-off evaluation in an exam or continuous evaluation, most students consider that continued evaluation would result in greater objectivity in the evaluation of student knowledge.
9. Somewhat less than half of students interviewed report that corruption is present in their university faculty/department to some degree.

10. One in five students interviewed considers that the current system of evaluation of knowledge is prone to some form of discrimination.
11. The most frequent form of corruption, in the opinion of students, is getting pass grades on exams through connections, and enrolment in university faculties/departments outside of the merit and exam based ranking list. Almost 2/3 of students interviewed report that these forms of corruption are present at their universities.
12. The majority of students interviewed consider that the general situation in the society, the non-functioning of the rule of law, the passive attitude of government to the problems of corruption, and the very mentality of people here, are factors that in the greatest measure uphold the presence of corruption in universities.
13. The most common forms of sexual harassment present in faculties in B&H, according to students interviewed, include categories of behavior such as: insulting female intelligence, making inferences of females as sex objects through telling of inappropriate jokes, milder criteria towards female students who dress more provocatively, etc.
14. Over a half of all students interviewed consider that the current system of organizing exams and assessment of student knowledge is in large or at least some measure contributes to the manifestation of corruption and sexual harassment in faculties. Upon making a review we can draw the following conclusions.
15. Assessment/examination policies in universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are regulated primarily through faculty statutes – independent members of the University. The University statute and the existing laws on higher education do not provide even the most basic directions in this area. The consequence of this highly decentralized regulation in this area is that it does not provide for consistent and equal principles and standards.
16. It seems that there is a large gap between the regulations on the one hand and the application or practical application of these on the other. As in many other areas of life in B&H, it is a particular challenge in the current political situation to reach a compromise in drafting and passing of legislation; but it is an equal, if not greater, challenge to implement and ensure adherence to laws, rules and regulations in practice.
17. When we compare the situation in B&H with some standard practices in other countries, we might say that the main difference is in the part that relates to practice and not so much that relating to regulations themselves. What we do find is that the assessment/examination policy in B&H is not sufficiently developed and detailed, or institutionalized. There are too many very important points that are left as a discretionary right of professors; and what is more, there is no institutional mechanism that conducts control of that policy.
18. In defining the fundamental principles of student assessment and examination policies under the circumstances prevailing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is necessary to take into

account practices in other countries, particularly in the European Union; but it is also necessary to take into account the specific characteristics of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Key policy recommendations

1. Complete regulations about assessment/examination policies should be defined at the University level by University statutes. It is favorable, but not essential that this be conducted on certain common principles common for the whole country. Faculties would be obliged to respect these and build them into their own statutes in a measure that does not violate the letter and spirit of the University Statute.
2. It is necessary that there exist in every University a body that will conduct regular supervision and control of the implementation of student assessment/examination policies. This can be done by anybody and in the framework of a future Agency for quality assurance.
3. Even though it cannot be said that it is a broadly accepted standard, under conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina we consider that it is essential to introduce full protection of student identity in exams. Protection of student identity would be practiced so that all work submitted for assessment by students in exams would have their student code. Apart from that, students would access exams with their own unique student code and would sign all exams with this code. In this way not only that students would be protected but professors as well.
4. Protection of student identity means that the vast majority of all exams would be written. Only in very particular cases is it necessary to organize verbal exams. Written exams have to be in accordance with the curriculum, lecture content, and practical exercises conducted in the course of studies.
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6. Assessment of student knowledge should be continuous. This means that the work of students should be assessed over the course of the whole year. Principles should define only the basic elements of continuous assessment, points system, assessment, and minimum pass criteria. For example, the student could obtain maximum 100 points during the year. Out of that a minimum of 70 points should be required for pass. Every professor would have the liberty to determine how many points a student is required to obtain for active class attendance (lectures and exercises), seminars, group exercise, homework, partial exams, exams, etc.
7. Continuous assessment of student knowledge would require a change of the current system of organization of exams in a way that would allow students to have two main exams during a whole year-one at the end of the first and one at the end of the second semester. This means that there would still be a need for two exam periods when these exams will be conducted.

8. We consider that a continuous student assessment would significantly improve student pass and selection of those who really study in comparison to others who do not. However, in our opinion, in order to make the regime of exams easier it is necessary to change the policy of student passing criteria in two ways:

8.1. A student will permanently lose their right to continue studies if they do not pass (having number of points less than 70) one third (or some other number) of subjects in one year of study.

8.2. Stop the current practice of carrying over exams from one year into the next. If a student does not obtain the required number of points for pass, he/she would be given a chance for another exam. This exam should be charged. So, if a student does not achieve the required minimal number of points for pass, a student permanently loses his/her right to continue studies. The same should be applied in the situation when the student achieves the minimum number of points in 1/3 of subjects.

9. Planning of all examination dates should be made at the very start of the academic year. This relates primarily to partial and final exams. The process of organizing exams can be rationalized so that students from a number of departments, or even faculties can sit for their exam at the same time.

Conclusion

The above presented study has shown that the current system of organization of exams and student assessment is prone to discrimination of students on the basis of their characteristics, and this system has an impact on the presence of corruption and sexual harassment.

We believe that because of that we should accede the reform of that field and not wait for a Framework Law on Higher Education. The current legislation does not allow that opportunity. During the reform we have to pay attention to standard best practices from closest surroundings, before all the EU, as well as to the specifics of Bosnia and Herzegovina.