

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Higher education policies in the last two decades are related to the wider European trends for reforms in this social sphere. The Bologna reforms started as an idea to create inclusive higher education where mobility of study programs, students and academic staff can provide more quality and practical utilization of knowledge. In Republic of Macedonia this process was upgraded with the tendency for dispersion of higher education programs. But more factors such as demographic indicators, quality of study programs, technical and material preconditions, and the political priorities of state authorities, create space for debates of necessity and success of this policy. In this paper we are starting with the functional aspects of regional higher education structure, followed with analyses of the Macedonian case, and presenting results of conducted survey.

**Keywords:** *higher education, Macedonia, reforms, dispersion, students.*

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## Introduction

In 1999 the Bologna Declaration promoted the project of unification of standards in higher education of Europe<sup>2</sup>. This Declaration was based on Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988, where some universal educational principals with regard with study mobility and higher educational standards were imposed (Reinalda, Bob and Ewa Kulesza, 2005). With the main goal of unification of quality standards between European countries, European Higher Education area was created.

The Bologna Declaration is based on the following general principles:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, particularly through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement;
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate;
- Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility;
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement of students and teachers;
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies and
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programs of study, training and research (The Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Creation and development of the European region of higher education depends on the accomplishment of the responsibilities taken by the institutions of higher education. Their clear politics of internationalization should take in consider the following measures:

- Strengthening of the educational staff with international experience;
- Creation of student programs, which are going to be presented in one of the world languages;
- Creation of study programs which are going to provide transfer of credits for the domestic and foreign students;

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<sup>2</sup> The Bologna Declaration or Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education, was adopted by ministers of education of 29 European countries on the meeting in Bologna on 19 June 1999.

- Development of information centers which are going to offer clear and transparent information for the students in relation with the international possibilities;
- Strengthening of students scholarships;
- Building mechanisms which are going to improve the transfer of scholarships and credits and
- Overcoming of the mobility barriers by better and easier mechanisms for obtaining visas (Denkova, 2005).

Regarding the basic Bologna principles and the measures required to be imposed for its implementation, there are series of debates regarding different aspects of Higher Education reforms. For example, there are discussions related to the questions of: Universalistic or particularistic character of Higher Education<sup>3</sup>; the need and increased role of the administration in Higher Educational Institutions<sup>4</sup>; the question of autonomy<sup>5</sup>; the transition of students from lower to higher education, and their

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<sup>3</sup> The technical and political aspects of Bologna process, as well and the evolving relationship between national and superordinate communities (the international community and Europe, the national community and regional community), for Neave are related to the wider process of the globalization in general (Neave, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Developing and evolving of Higher Education Institutions toward market economy, as well, incorporating united standards and study mobility increase the demand for greater administrative support in those institutions. For Baltaru and Soysal, Higher University Institutions are facing an “age of supercomplexity” in which knowledge claims are no longer made solely by universities, but knowledge production is increasingly built in private firms and nonacademic organizations. Such a context has fostered expanded and diversified their missions, whereby they are expected to proactively engage with wider society and explicitly articulate their contribution to social and economic development. At the organizational level, it has been associated with an increase in the number of administrators, along with declining influence and autonomy for academics (Baltaru, Roxana-Diana and Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The importance of autonomy of University has several aspects included. The formal autonomy from political authorities and other state agents is guaranteed by the highest formal acts, as the Constitution of the state or international standards and practices. But, also, developing autonomy is an integral “learning outcome” of most university courses. Definitions of learner autonomy generally include a number of key themes: responsibility or ownership of outcomes (internal locus of control); confidence in skills or ability to achieve (self-efficacy); engagement with student-led learning (self-regulation). By Henri, Morrell and Scott, two schools of thought exist on whether students do indeed develop autonomy over the course of their university degrees: one argues that autonomy is a fixed trait of individuals that changes little over time, while

progress in years of study<sup>6</sup>; the question of quality of Higher Educational Process<sup>7</sup>; the basic character and role of Higher Education and its orientation toward knowledge and producing critical thinkers from one side, or focusing on preparing the students for the market<sup>8</sup>.

In the further part of this article we are opening some of the mentioned questions in the context of the South-Eastern Europe region, with separate focus on the Higher Education and Higher Educational Institutions in Republic of Macedonia. The last part will address some of the attitudes of High School students in four regions of Republic of Macedonia toward their perceptions on continuation with higher education.

### **Higher Education in South-Eastern Europe Countries**

The diversity of the region of South-Eastern Europe reflects on the differences and specifics in the Higher Educational Systems. The basic division of the region is on two parts- countries that are members of the European Union, and non-member countries, united in the region of Western Balkans. But, on the other side, excluding Greece, there are many similarities, mainly in the historical traditions of

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the other suggests it can be developed (Henri, D. C., L. J. Morrell and G. W. Scott, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The transition of students from Lower toward Higher education is important process, which refers to accommodation to the new university community and creating new kind of social identity. This includes some social aspects, aspects of developing new approach of critical thinking and incorporation of the role of university professors (Tett, Lyn, Vivienne E Cree and Hazel Christie, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Quality culture in Higher Education results from an interplay between contributing organizational context elements, working mechanisms and quality related outcomes. Higher Education attempts to address the structural/managerial dimension of quality culture are reflected in their attention to improvement strategies, evaluation systems, staff and student involvement, student centeredness and attention to policies, procedures and responsibilities (Bendermacher G. W. G., M. G. A. oude Egbrink, I. H. A. P. Wolfhagen, and D. H. J. M. Dolmans, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> For example, for Lenartowicz, the autopoietic identity of the university justifies academic professors being preoccupied with what their students know, understand and are able to question and explain, and not with what concepts and qualities are currently considered worthy a transaction within the system of the economy—be it even a transaction of employment at the job market. Or in general, this refers to dialectics of basic role of the university to generate knowledge and critical thinking or, the adequate education of students for the job market (Lenartowicz, 2015).

transformation of the Educational Systems and society in general, from one party systems in 1990's and the movement toward democracy. In the 2000s, in all of the Western Balkans countries, Bologna related reforms of higher education took place, including changes in legislation and, less often, changes in funding arrangements, as well as changes in curricula. Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro joined the Bologna process in 2003, and Kosovo, which, due to its formal status regarding its independence, is a complex matter (Vukasovic, 2012). This change can be seen in the multiplication of the Higher Educational Institutions in the Western Balkans region, from around 20 state universities and no private ones in 1990's to more than 50 state universities currently, and more than 250 private ones. Also, there are many students from the region who finish their education in the universities of Western European countries and USA.

Therefore, the processes of reforms in Higher Education are moving with different dynamics. Zagaga notes that there is clear progress in the Higher Education quality and research initiatives, but the general opinion is that the qualification of educational institutions, judging private ones to be the best, leads towards fragmentalization, and decrease of the quality. The regional view is almost identical when we are converging on the illusive relation between so called policy makers and the researchers, especially in their cooperation in Higher Educational Reforms. Zagaga also notes that besides domestic politics, higher education systems and their regulation have experienced profound changes as a result of policies designed at the supranational level (e.g. the Bologna Process; the European Commission; in some cases the OECD and the World Bank) (Zagaga, Pavel, 2013).

In 2015 in the region of the Western Balkans there were 140 registered Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) (Table 1), with 5,213 study programs. In relation to population, the greatest density of HEIs is in Kosovo and Montenegro. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the largest percentage of state universities (79, 5 %), and Kosovo the largest percentage of private universities (43, 1 %). Albania has the most study programs (1,757) and Montenegro the least (255). Macedonia has the largest number of study programs for BA studies (82, 6 % of all study programs are at the BA level), Montenegro has the largest number of Master Studies (42 % of all study programs are on Master Studies) and Serbia has the largest number in Doctoral Studies (16, 4 % of all study programs are Doctoral Studies). By area, regarding the average of all of the countries in the region of the Western Balkans, Albania has the highest percentage of study programs in Health & Welfare (12, 2 % of all study programs in the country), Bosnia and Herzegovina in Education (12, 1 %), Arts & Humanities (25, 5 %), Social Sciences, Journalism & Information (13, 7 %) and Natural Sciences, Mathematics & Statistics (9, 5 %), Kosovo has the highest number in Business, Administration & Law (31, 1 %), Macedonia has the highest number in Information & Communication Technologies (9, 8 %), Montenegro has the highest number Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries & Veterinary (3, 9 %) and Services (9, 4 %) and

Serbia has the most study programs regarding the regional average in Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction (20, 3 %). By all of this data we can notice that there is diversity in the priorities of the areas of study and study programs in the countries in the region. The number of students enrolled in higher educational programs in Serbia is around 190,000, in Albania 120,000, Kosovo 100,000, Bosnia and Herzegovina less than 100,000, Macedonia around 60,000, and Montenegro around 20,000 students.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the general number of the population, Albania and Kosovo have a high number of students. Also, we should notice that in the period from 2007 to 2013 there is general tendency of increasing the number of students enrolled in study programs in Serbia, but since 2014-15 there is small general tendency of decreasing of this number. Similar situation can be seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the decrease starts in 2011, and in the other countries in the region there is tendency of stagnation of the number of enrolled students (Skikos (ed.), 2016).

Table 1: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Western Balkans in 2015 (Skikos (ed.), 2016)

	HEIs	Public HEIs	Private HEIs	Faculties	HEI per 100,000 population	Faculties per 100,000 population
Albania	39	16	23	119	1.3	4.1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	47	10	37	120	1.2	3.1
Kosovo	41	12	29	48	2.2	2.6
Macedonia	16	5	11	126	0.8	6.1
Montenegro	12	1	11	45	2.1	7.2
Serbia	85	51	34	128	1.2	1.8
Western Balkans	<b>240</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>3.2</b>

Even the number of private universities is bigger, yet, in the region of South-East Europe most of the students are enrolled in state funded universities. The perception

<sup>9</sup> By Zivaljevic, Vrcelj and Tosovic Stefanovic in 2012/13 on Higher Educational Institutions Albania had 162 875 enrolled students, Croatia 157 289, Bosnia and Herzegovina 72 460, Macedonia 56 906, Montenegro 22 279, Serbia 193 255 enrolled students (Zivaljevic, Vrcelj and Tosovic Stefanovic, 2015).

of the quality of the programs, accessibility and the higher quality of the teaching staff are reasons future students have for making a state university their first choice. The growth of private universities is often diminished by lack of resources, part-time employment, contract work, and the employment of practitioners and teaching staff without a doctorate degrees. In addition, private institutions have not significantly contributed to program diversification. Also, one of the key problems is related to average graduation rates, which are below 40% for students within 10 years of their enrollment. The most extreme are cases of Croatia, Macedonia, and Albania. For all institutions, one of the biggest problems is lack of research funds. Even the European programs cannot fill the gap of the weak state economies (Brajkovic, 2016).

### **Higher Education in Republic of Macedonia**

Higher Education in Republic of Macedonia has some similarities with the trends in the wider region, but also some specifics. Today, in Republic of Macedonia there are 20 Higher Educational Institutions, of which 6 are state universities and 14 private. The process of reforms started more intensively with the process of adoption of Bologna standards in 2003, with full implementation in 2004, and multiplication of higher educational institutions and study programs. This produced debates on quality of the education vs. quantification and dispersion of the study programs on one side, and de-monopolization and accessibility to higher education on the other. Also, we should notice the problem of ethnification of the higher education in Republic of Macedonia.<sup>10</sup> Beside universities where the educational process is based on the Macedonian language, there are three state funded Albanian universities and several private, as well as some private Turkish universities<sup>11</sup>.

The main problems of the higher education can be traced to insufficient investment in education by the state, where many recommendations are suggesting up to 5 % of national GDP to be allocated to this sphere (Shaqiri, 2017). Particularly at state universities, higher salaries for teachers, greater funding for research and analysis,

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<sup>10</sup> The segregation based on ethnicity and language of usage can be found in all educational levels, from primary school to university education. This is one of the basic factors for creating segregated society (Bakiu and others, 2016). Segregation of education in multi-ethnic countries is part of a global debate, especially in post-conflict countries like Macedonia. This type of segregation, especially between Macedonians and Albanians, does not promote contact and the creation of positive identities which can tackle discrimination and prejudice thus leading to reconciliation. Ethnicized divisions create parallel societies within a country, which mistrust one another (Kavaja, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Also, there are some universities as University American College in Skopje and partly the University of South-Eastern Europe in Tetovo and Skopje, where the educational process is based on English language.

investment in labs and information technology would increase the quality of education. This can largely be achieved if the state budget has sufficient resources for investment in education, though greater cooperation with the private sector might also help. In general, as the rest of the region, there is a gap between state and private universities with preference of the students is to attend state universities.

On May 2, 2018, the new Law on Higher Education was adopted in the Macedonian Parliament ([sobrane.mk](http://sobrane.mk)). This law should be more inclusive toward the teaching staff and students, with the main goal of improving the autonomy and quality of higher education in general. In structural and organizational sense, the new law allows for two basic models of organization of the universities – model of more centralized and integrated universities and model where the faculties will have more autonomy.

### ***Basic Demographic Data***

The basic demographic indicators for Republic of Macedonia's population growth, and student numbers also, reflect on some of regional trends. Since the research is focused on four statistical regions (Eastern, South-Eastern, Vardar and North-Eastern), we are also presenting demographic data for them.

Map: Statistical Regions of Republic of Macedonia





Regional trends of depopulation due to lower rate of fertility and mechanical depopulation by migration is characteristic of the region and Macedonian society. In the last 30 years there has been a decrease of newly born children in Republic of Macedonia, from 37,879 in 1988 to 23,002 newly born in 2016 (Table 2). The same tendency can be noticed in the birth rate in the last ten years from 1.5 per 1,000 in 2007, with small trend of increasing by 2010 by 2.5 per 1,000 and decreasing again by 2016 when the fertility rate is only 1.2 per 1,000. This depopulation trend is more visible in the four regions of Eastern and Central Macedonia, where for example in 2016, the fertility rate in the Eastern region is negative  $-2.3$  (Table 3). The mentioned indicators greatly influence the present and future number of potential students.

Graphics 1 Number of live born children in Republic of Macedonia in interval of 4 years

Source: State Agency for statistics of Republic of Macedonia

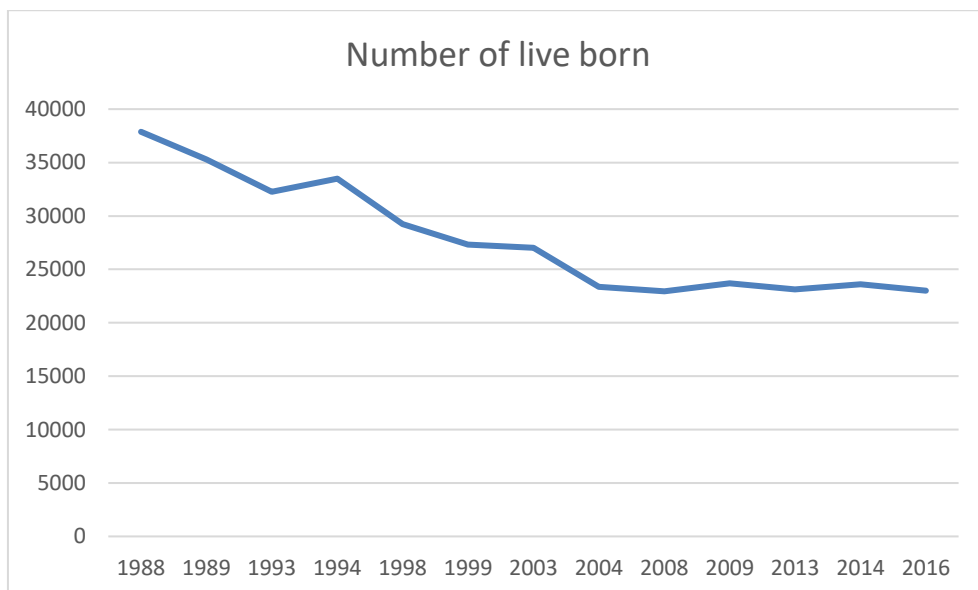


Table 2 Birth Rate of population in Republic of Macedonia and by Regions

Source: State Agency for statistics of Republic of Macedonia

Year	Birth Rate in Republic of Macedonia - Total	Birth Rate by Regions			
		Eastern	South-Eastern	Vardar	North-Eastern
2016	1.2	-2.3	0.3	-0.9	1.1
2015	1.3	-1.6	0.3	-1.1	0.8
2014	1.9	-1.9	0.7	-0.4	2.3
2013	1.9	-1.7	1.3	-0.5	2.4
2012	1.7	-1.6	1.4	-0.1	2.2
2011	1.6	-1.9	0.4	-0.3	1.4
2010	2.5	-0.2	1.9	0.8	2.7
2009	2.3	-0.5	1.9	0.5	3
2008	1.9	-0.9	2.1	0.4	2
2007	1.5	-1.3	1.2	-0.6	1.4

Even with the visible negative trends of population movements, we should notice that by 2012 the number of enrolled and finished students was growing. This is due to new trends towards larger enrolment of high school students into universities. This fact follows the multiplication of Higher Educational Institutions in Republic of Macedonia (both private and state) and de-monopolization of this level of education, increasing the number of students which are enrolled in universities abroad<sup>12</sup>, especially since adoption of the Bologna process in 2004. If in the year 2000 the

<sup>12</sup> The most popular destinations for students from Republic of Macedonia, beside Western European countries as UK or Germany and USA, are Bulgaria, where in the last decade the number of students from Macedonia was estimated to be a few thousand, some of universities in Salonika, Greece, and Universities in Slovenia where in recent years there have been several hundred students enrolled. For example, on University of Ljubljana only, in 2016/17, from 2,345 total foreign students, estimated 500 were from Macedonia (factor.mk).

number of students which finished higher education was only 3,706, by 2008 it had grown to 10,638 and to 10,210 in 2012. Yet, in the last five years, the number of students enrolled in universities has decreased; in 2016 the number of students which finished university education was 7,947. Similar trends can be noticed in the four regions subject to analyses. For instance, in the Eastern region the maximum was in the year of 2012 when there were 1070 students who gained university degrees. This is due to the establishment of the new state university, Goce Delchev, in 2007. But, even in this region, the decreasing trend after 2012 is noticeable, and in 2016 the number of students who finished their degree is almost equal on the number of 2005 (Table 4).

Table 3 Total number of finished students in time interval of 4 years and by regions

Source: State Agency for statistics of Republic of Macedonia

Year	Total number of finished students in time interval of 4 years (from 2000)	Number of finished students in time interval of 4 years by regions (from 2000)			
		Eastern	South-Eastern	Vardar	North-Eastern
2016	7,947	579	526	593	646
2012	10,210	1070	795	851	696
2008	10,638	833	656	822	673
2004	4,993	421	297	358	313
2000	3,706	366	213	297	179

### ***Research Methodology and Research Results***

The survey was conducted in 2017 in 13 towns from the four regions (Eastern, North-Eastern, Vardar and South-Eastern region) and included students from 17 high schools. The sample included 1,432 high school students of which 49 % were in third year and 51 % were in fourth year of studies. By gender 48.1 % were male and 5.9 % female. 64.9 % live in urban areas and 35.1 % in rural areas. The average grade in previous year 30.3 % are with 5; 32.1 % with 4; 28,6 % with 3; 7.3 % with 2; 0.6 % with 1; and no data 1.1 %.<sup>13</sup> Educational level of the parents were as follows: 12.9 %

<sup>13</sup> The grades in Macedonia's high school system are excellent 5 as the highest grade, very good 4, good 3, sufficient 2 and insufficient 1 as the lowest.

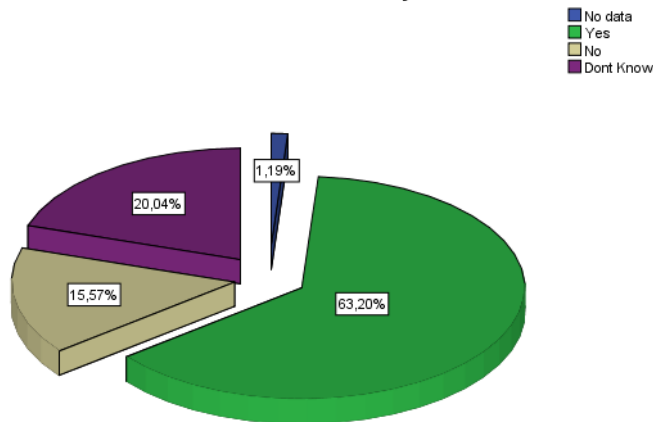
had a basic education, 63.8 % had a high school education, 21.1 % had a university education, with 1.5 % listed as other and no data for 0.6 %.

In the survey, the questions included were related mainly to the students' perceptions of the next level of higher education.

From the results, we can notice that the most of high school students, or 63.2 %, are planning to continue their education at university (Graphics 1). This figure can be broken down as follows: 87.3 % of excellent high school students will continue at university, 75.9 % of very good, 40 % of good and 7.6 % of those with sufficient average grade plan to continue their education. This data correlates with the process of implementation of Bologna standards in Macedonian educational system, decentralization of the higher education and the greater accessibility, as well as with some global trends of the liberalization of the educational process where many students get their degree abroad.

## Graphics 2

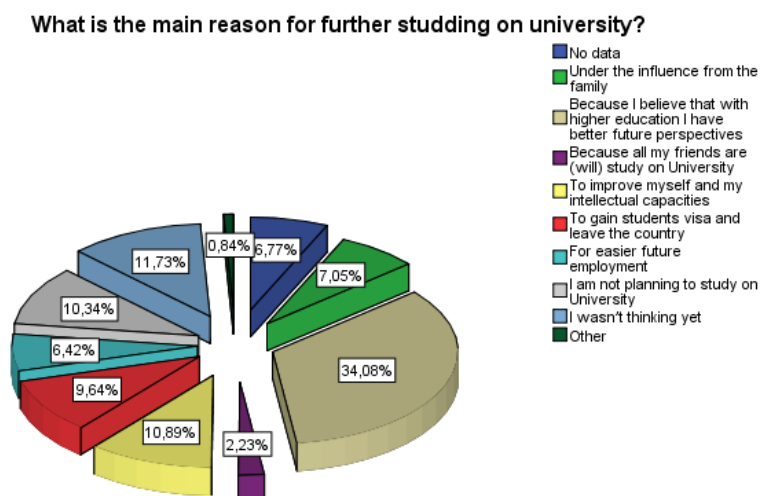
After finishing high school, are you planning to continue with the education on university



On the question “What is the main reason for further study at university?”, the most popular choices are: because the education is a precondition for better future perspectives (34.8 %), to improve their intellectual capacities (9.64 %) and obtaining a student visa for possible migration abroad (10.89 %) (Graphics 2). This question

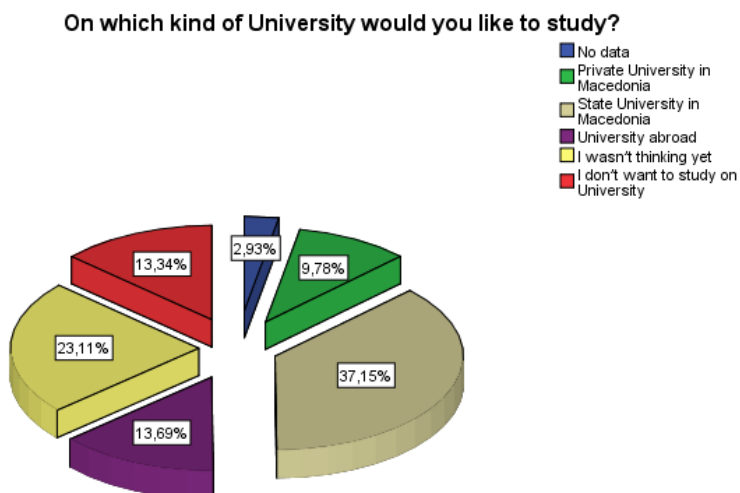
reflects general political and economic perspectives for the youth in the Republic of Macedonia. Not having secure and sustainable employment for the young high school graduates often turns them toward university education, not just as a rational choice for better perspectives and improved employment, but also, as the research results show, as possibility for easier migration abroad.

Graphics 3



As in the wider region of South Eastern Europe, the trends in Macedonia make state universities more popular choice. 37.15 % of high school students would like to study at a state university, 9.78 % at a private university and 13.69 % would like to study at a university abroad (Graphics 3). Because of the indecision of many high school students we can assume that this preference of state universities will increase. Accessibility, lower costs and better quality reputation of state universities would lead students to choose a state university over a private one.

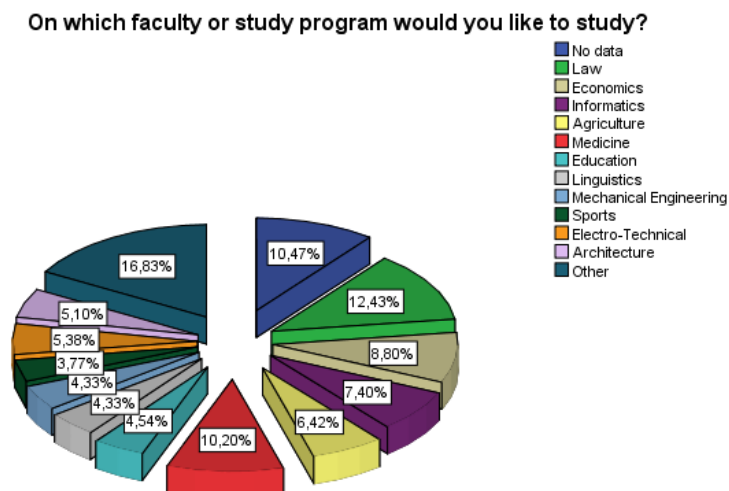
#### Graphics 4



The most popular state universities in the regions within this survey are the University “St. Cyril’s and Methodius” in Skopje (UKIM), this being the preference of 24.4 % of the high school students and Goce Delchev University of Shtip (UGD) with a 20.3% preference. The high school students from urban areas and with higher education of one of the parents are more likely to choose study on UKIM. Also, the students with better grades prefer UKIM (41 % of excellent high school students had choose UKIM over 16.6 % of the excellent students who chose UGD).

The most preferable faculties or study programs for the high school students are Law (12.4 %), Medicine (10.2 %), Economics (8.8 %) and Informatics (7.4 %) (Graphics 4). Even though the state made some efforts in the last decade to popularize the technical and natural sciences and their study programs, in Macedonia the most popular areas of study are the social science disciplines. The main reason can be found in perspectives which these studies offer for future employment, particularly with the state. The state remains the biggest employer with insufficient development of the private sector. However, driven by the growing market needs, Informatics are exception and in the last years more students are choosing this faculty.

Graphics 5

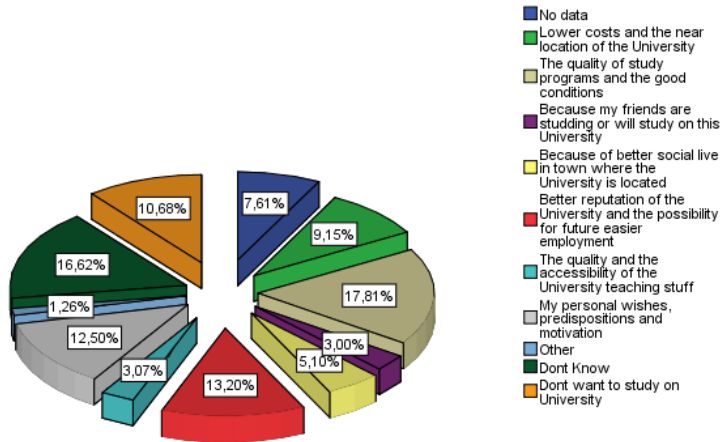


The main criteria for high school students for choosing a future university are the quality of study programs and the good conditions (17.8 %), better reputation of the university and the possibility for easier future employment (13.2 %) and their personal wishes, predispositions and motivation (12.5 %) (Graphics 5). The main reasons for choosing private universities in Macedonia are the quality of study programs and the good conditions (25.7 % of those who chose private university) and better reputation of the university and the possibility for easier future employment (22.9 %); the main reasons for choosing state university are the quality of study programs and the good conditions and (25.7 % of those who chose state university), lower costs and convenient location of the university (18.4 %) and personal wishes predispositions and motivation (16.2 %); and for choosing university abroad the main reasons are better reputation of the university and the possibility for easier future employment (24 % of the students which choose to study on university abroad) and the quality of study programs and the good conditions (22.4 %). From the state universities in Macedonia, the main reason for choosing UKIM is the quality of study programs and the good conditions (28.6 % of those who chose UKIM) and for choosing UGD, lower costs and convenient location of the university (31.3 % of those who chose UGD).

From the last data we can notice that the preference for state universities over the private is not only the result of better perception regarding the conditions or quality of the study program, but also and of accessibility generated by the close location and lower costs. Those objective criteria are not excluding the personal choice which, in general, is driven by good reputation of those universities. In the last context, comparing the criteria for the two largest state universities we can notice that the perceptions for quality criteria are the main reason for choosing UKIM vs social criteria based on accessibility and low costs for choosing UGD.

Graphics 6

Which is the main reason in decision making process for choosing University?



**Conclusion**

The main trigger for reforms in the region of South-Eastern Europe and Republic of Macedonia in particular in the last 25 years is the Bologna process. This triggered standardization of the education curricula and better possibility for students and teachers mobility. Yet, in the region of South East Europe there are some specifics regarding the domination of the state universities vs private and process of quantification of Higher Educational Institutions and study programs. This triggered



debates concerning the quality of education on the one hand, and its accessibility on the other.

Regarding higher education, the main problems of Macedonia's universities are related with the wider context of the region with some specifics. Ethnification of educational space of all levels, including higher education, creates parallel societies, especially between two biggest ethnic communities- Macedonian and Albanian. But the biggest problem is related with demographic characteristics and the trends of decreasing of young population and therefore potential students. The number of high school students enrolled in university had its peak between 2004 and 2012, afterward followed process of stagnation and decrease.

The results of the conducted research have shown that a greater percentage of high school students are willing to continue their education at university, mainly because they see education as a precondition for better future prospects, as well as the lack of employment immediately after finishing high school. The wider trends in Macedonia also show that state universities are the most popular choices. The most popular faculties and study programs are in Social Sciences with the exception of Medical Sciences and Informatics. This is due to the fact that the state and its institutions are the biggest employer in Macedonia. Finally we notice that the preference of the state universities is related to the perception of higher quality, better accessibility and lower costs.

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