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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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KOSOVO

A FUTURE YET TO BE DELIVERED: THE EDUCATION SYSTEM'S FAILURE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF WIDESPREAD INTERNET ACCESS

KEYWORDS: education

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Introduction

Kosovo is unique in having widespread internet access yet having an underdeveloped education system.

The country has a high number of students going through formal education: from a population of 1.8 million, about 470,000 or 26% are enrolled in an educational institution.[1] The average age of the population is around 30 years old.

According to a recent survey, at least 76.6% of the Kosovar population uses the internet[2] and at least 84.81% of households have access to it.[3] The number of users with 3G and 4G mobile internet access is almost 780,000.[4] Contrary to most other countries globally, the urban and rural rate of access is roughly the same. Furthermore, the Kosovar internet is not yet policed by copyright interests or censored by the government. Internet is widely accessible on desktops and on smartphones. As such, it provides a worthy "what if" scenario to study.

Yet despite the general high internet access rate in homes, only 12.41% of the population accesses the internet in schools or universities[5] and the high rate of access has not translated into wide use of the internet for educational development.[6]

Kosovo is an exemplary case of a developing country with a strong right to education, significant challenges in realising the right to education, and the internet not being used to enable this right. At least not yet. This is the story of lost opportunities.

Background

Kosovo is not a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), although through its Constitution it has embraced the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its Protocols, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right to education is enshrined in the country's modern constitution.[7]

The ICESCR recognises education both as a human right and as an indispensable means of realising other human rights. Article 13 deals with the right to education, while Article 15 deals with the intertwined and closely related right to take part in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.

Expenditure on education per pupil is low compared to the region and the European Union (EU), though it is increasing every year. This stems partly from a low GDP base and small government budget set aside for education, and partly because Kosovo has significantly more pupils per total population than other countries. On the other hand, in 2014 about 71.4% of the education budget went to the sector's wages and salaries.

Post-war investment in the education system has gone towards rebuilding school infrastructure destroyed during the war, constructing new schools to address crowded classrooms that are used for up to three teaching shifts, and raising teacher salaries. Two other key projects have been furthering the education of teachers with the goal of all teachers obtaining bachelor degrees, and computer training for teachers. Two ICT-related training programmes were offered during 2011-2015: around 55% of all teachers attended the European Computer Driving

1 Statistics Agency of Kosovo. (2016). *Education Statistics 2015/2016*. ask.rks-gov.net/en/latest-news/127-education-statistics-2015-2016

2 Fazliu, A. (2013). *Internet penetration and usage in Kosovo*. STIKK. stikk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Internet_penetration_and_usage_in_Kosovo.pdf

3 Regulatory Authority of Telecommunication and Postal Communications. (2016). *Përmbledhje e Indikatorëve Kryesorë të Komunikimeve Elektronike 'Pasqyrë e Tregut të Komunikimeve Elektronike' për TM1 2016" (Summary of Key Indicators of the Electronic Communications 'Market Overview Electronic Communications' for Q1 2016)*. arkep-rks.org/repository/docs/Pasqyra%20e%20tregut%20TM1%202016.pdf

4 Ibid.

5 Fazliu, A. (2013). Op. cit.

6 Romania is a similar case. A much larger share of Romanians have ultra-fast internet connections compared to other European countries, yet one third of the country's population has never used the internet. Half of all households have no broadband connection – half of households don't even have a computer. See: kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/headline-story/16900/romanian-digital-divide

7 Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 47. www.kushtetutakosoves.info/repository/docs/Constitution.of.the.Republic.of.Kosovo.pdf

License (ECDL)[8] programme and about 8% of teachers received e-learning training[9] that looked to integrate ICTs in the classroom. The Kosovo government also began supplying textbooks to all its public education students in grades 1-9 at a cost of EUR 7 million (USD 7.8 million) annually.[10] With a large number of students and low annual expenditure per student, the policy choices in budget distribution become critical.

The country has low levels of educational attainment. In 2015 only 53.9% of students passed the high school exit exam in their first sitting.[11]

The role of the internet in education: A policy analysis

A comprehensive government policy that is dedicated to the role of the internet in education does not exist, although the internet's role in education is recognised in a number of related policies.

The Electronic Communication Sector Policy highlights three national priorities in the area: the development of ICT infrastructure, the development of electronic content and services and promoting the use of this content, and increasing the ability of Kosovar citizens to use ICTs. For the last two goals, there is very little to show. The policy also states that the government will consider options for the deployment of broadband internet services in schools and other academic institutions, public health institutions and cultural institutions. The policy sees a particular opportunity in the use of ICT for the preservation of cultural heritage and for the distribution of educational resources.[12]

The policy also states that residents of Kosovo need enhanced digital skills to participate fully in society. It recognises that e-learning is not sufficiently incorporated in education and training policies, and acknowledges the role the internet could play in informal learning. The policy calls for the mainstreaming of e-learning in national policies for education and training, including the development of curricula, tools for assessing learning outcomes, and the professional development of teachers and trainers.[13]

Another report evaluating Kosovo's educational achievements and failures over the period 2011-2016 concludes that the education system has low access to ICTs, that ICTs are poorly integrated into the curriculum, and the means for teachers and pupils to acquire technology are lacking. The report states that the "integration of ICTs in learning and teaching remains an important priority that needs to be addressed in the next planning cycle."[14]

The policy evaluation highlights the importance of demand stimulation, such as developing e-literacy and skills and relevant content, as much as supply-side measures, which traditionally have focused on infrastructure expansion only.

The strategic plan recommends rolling out internet access to 600 educational institutions, the doubling of the number of computers in schools by providing 8,000 new units, promoting the use of information technology in learning by equipping 20,000 students with laptops each year in technical vocational schools and centres of competence, promoting the use of information technology in teaching by piloting a laptop scheme for teachers, including equipping 7,500 teachers of upper and lower secondary school with laptops, and equipping all educational institutions at pre-university level with video projectors, among other upgrades, at a cost of EUR 15 million (USD 16.7 million) over five years.[15] But it is unlikely the system will be able to absorb such an investment.

The Curriculum Framework of 2011 identifies the need to build a knowledge society and the integration of education into the digital era among its five key challenges.

The section "Design of new materials for teaching and learning in support of the development of competencies" includes materials created by teachers for various thematic teaching units, resources from the internet that already exist, the development of an e-learning platform, and an electronic library. However, these are not yet in use, and a survey by the author of actual high school curricula shows that when the internet is mentioned it is merely listed among a long list of available

8 The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) is a computer literacy certification programme provided by the ECDL Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation. www.ecdl.com

9 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of the Republic of Kosovo. (2015). *Evaluation Report: Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011-2016*. https://masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2016/02/raport-vleresimi-psak-2011-2016-eng-web.pdf

10 Anadolu Agency. (2015, 25 August). Nxënësit në Shqipëri, Kosovë dhe Maqedoni përgatiten për Vitin e ri shkollor. *Anadolu Agency.* aa.com.tr/sq/arsim/nxënësit-në-shqipëri-kosovë-dhe-maqedoni-përgatiten-për-vitin-e-ri-shkollor/6830

11 masht.rks-gov.net/article/kqshm-shpalli-rezultatet-e-testit-te-matures-kalueshmeria-539-perqind

12 Ministry of Economic Development of the Republic of Kosovo. (2013). *Electronic Communication Sector Policy 2013-2020.* mzhe.rks-gov.net/repository/docs/Electronic_Communication_Sector_Policy_2013-2020.pdf

13 Ibid.

14 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of Republic of Kosovo. (2015). Op. cit.

15 Musa, E. (2016, 3 August). Textbooks in Kosovo Binned or Burned at Cost of Millions. *Prishtina Insight.* prishtinainsight.com/textbooks-kosovo-binned-burned-cost-millions

options.[16] It is clear that the guidance established by overarching policies is not being translated into expectations for teachers' performance and actionable requirements.

From the side of the donor community, an EU project that supported the Kosovo government in improving the quality and efficiency of education and training services through the integration of ICTs into the teaching and learning process, and which piloted some of the initiatives above, seems to have faded with no noticeable long-lasting effect.[17]

Another initiative, funded by USAID and called the Basic Education Programme (BEP), has contributed to various capacity-building programmes, such as the publication of 21 multimedia reading books for first and second grades online.[18] Another of the programme's contributions is a guide on the use of technology to improve the learning of the English language. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education does not have an active process to distribute teaching and learning materials on the web.

In the private sector, trajnimi.com is a learning tool, an early massive open online course (MOOC) developed by Ipko Institute in 2007 for ECDL training at a cost of about EUR 10,000 (USD 11,200), which in 2008 was handed over to the Ministry of Education and has not been updated since. A year after its launch it had 25,000 users.[19]

Zgjoi.com is an inspiring initiative established in January 2015 by a retired university professor. The project curates educational content for grades 1-9 using educational videos from across the web and integrates white-board presentations made for students to support the state curriculum.[20] Simple English – most of the videos are not translated – is one of the criteria for video selection.[21]

Almooc.com is a privately developed, donor-supported MOOC targeting Albanian language speakers. It covers English, maths, physics, chemistry, ICTs and coding and follows the state curriculum for grades 5-13. The content has been developed drawing on existing curricula for these grades. Almooc.com has over 52,000 people signed up for its courses.[22]

Despite the buying power, the ministry of education does not acquire copyright on the textbooks it provides to students, choosing to pay per printed copy year after year. Owning the copyright would allow the ministry to allow other entities to build upon the books in different format.

Along the same lines, the Kosovo government has no policy to promote free and open source software. It is unclear whether software installed on school computers is properly licensed. The future expansion of computer access in schools is also at risk of being supplied from a single proprietary publisher. The government has already hinted that a repository of educational content will be tied to a proprietary solution being piloted, thereby ensuring lock-in,[23] whereas a freely available class administration system is not being used.[24] Furthermore, teachers receiving ECDL training are not instructed on the free software alternatives.

Conclusions

The potential of using the internet to further the right to education has not been realised in Kosovo, despite a number of policies that refer to the use of the internet in education.

The role of the internet in education in the country seems to be low in formal education and higher in informal education. Internet access at school and in the educational process is largely missing.

Kosovo is still in the "read-only" mode, instead of "read-write" mode, which is necessary for true education and development. This might be a result of the education system, which does not encourage student creativity and exploration beyond the rigid curricula, a consumerist media mindset that does not go beyond social interaction and entertainment, and a lack of trained critical thinking. In this regard, a rights-based environment for education to occur – one that encourages, for example, free expression in the classroom – does not exist.

The use of the internet requires time, effort and skill. Kosovo has a passive culture of education that values rote learning and fitting in and does not challenge students to explore and research.

16 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of the Republic of Kosovo. (2011). *Korniza e Kurrikulës e Arsimit Parauniversitar të Republikës së Kosovës (Curriculum Framework for Pre-university Education in the Republic of Kosovo)*. masht.rks-gov.net/uploads/2015/05/korniza-e-kurrikules11.pdf

17 www.rraks.net/en

18 See the books that were developed on the project website: www.bletapunetore.org

19 Email communication with trajnimi.com project manager Kushtrim Xhakli, 19 August 2016.

20 These are developed by his wife, who is also a teacher.

21 Interview with zgjoi.com founder and project manager Agron Dida, 3 August 2016.

22 Interview with almooc.com founder Ridvan Aliu, 3 August 2016.

23 The Ministry of Education though an established MoU is already piloting computer labs operating Microsoft products, although no tender has been awarded as mandated by law. Website in Albanian: masht.rks-gov.net/article/u-perurua-qendra-inovative-e-masht-dhe-filloi-projekti-showcase-classroom

24 The software in question is Moodle, free software being used successfully by the private higher education institutions in Kosovo. The implementation developed for the Kosovo Ministry of Education is here: moodle.rraks.net

Speaking a language of only six million speakers with a low level of general development, as is the case with the majority of the Albanian-speaking population, knowledge of the English language could act as a trampoline to accessing educational content online, including content produced in the developing field of MOOCs.

Furthermore, offline classroom instruction coupled with online work at home could serve as the best way to integrate the two worlds. Instead of investing valuable resources to supply each student with a computer, this part of learning could be relegated to after-school work given that the internet is readily available at most homes in Kosovo, and that remedial interventions can be provided for those who cannot afford it.

If technology amplifies underlying social conditions,[25] merely increasing internet access is not likely to be a transformative force for improving access to education. Instead of investing in further infrastructure, Kosovo should focus on content, building ICT skills and knowledge that empowers students and other citizens to take advantage of the internet.

Governments as the duty bearers, besides measuring the level of input such as investment, have a responsibility to provide effective and efficient measures to achieve the right to education, and to evaluate the impact that those measures are having. Before moving to more expensive investments such as bridging the digital gap in internet access for minority social groups yet to be connected, Kosovo should tweak its current efforts and processes to gain maximum advantage from the internet. In this way future plans to connect the unconnected will be more considered.

Action steps

The following action steps should be encouraged:

- Schools and universities should encourage students to sign up for MOOC classes and provide formally recognised academic credits for those who do so, as a way to compensate for what the education system cannot offer them.
- Educational resources must be available in print and in electronic form under open licensing schemes to allow others to build on the content that has been produced through public funds.
- Teachers, supported by funding, as well as students, should be encouraged to build content using dedicated wikis or established publishing platforms such as Wikipedia and other Wikimedia sister projects. This will enrich the educational commons in the Albanian language, as well as help to translate the available content that is licensed for sharing.
- Offline classwork and online content must be integrated in the curricula, though not necessarily in the classroom. As discussed above, the most efficient way to deliver online curricula is at home.
- Quality instruction of the English language must be provided and a culture of independence and active, ongoing learning developed among students.
- Free software should be used in schools and any cost savings should be dedicated to buying hardware where necessary.

25 For a discussion on how technology merely amplifies the existing human condition, see Kentaro Toyama's *Geek Heresy: Rescuing Social Change from the Cult of Technology.*

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The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an "inventory of things" that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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