

2025 European Quality Assurance Forum

QA in times of crises – Ensuring stability, autonomy and international cooperation in higher education

Hosted by Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary
12-14 November 2025

ISSN: 1375-3797

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Paper

Title: Post-Conflict Trends in Kosovo's Accreditation System: Redefining the Balance Between Institutions, the State, and the KAA

Abstract

The quality assurance system in higher education in Kosovo has evolved from a necessity arising from a post-conflict situation to the creation of a balanced framework that connects institutions, government, and the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA). This paper shows the development of KAA since its establishment in 2008 and examines how quality assurance has contributed to the legitimacy and stability in higher education. KAA's exclusion from ENQA and EQAR in 2017-2019, due to political interference, marked a critical turning point that brought about fundamental reforms in the work of KAA. The Law on Kosovo Accreditation Agency in 2023 has enabled the clear definition of responsibilities between KAA, the Ministry of Education and higher education institution (HEI). The reforms that followed such as digitalization, the involvement of stakeholders and international cooperation have strengthened and advanced internal and external quality assurance processes. The paper concludes that clear division of responsibilities of KAA, Ministry and HEIs and also compliance with European standards made the return of KAA to EQAR in 2025 possible, and brought back Kosovo's credibility in the European Higher Education Area.

Introduction and Historical Overview

Higher Education in Kosovo started and was developed amidst a challenging history, accompanied by political turmoil and efforts for independence and national identity. The first institutions of higher education in Kosovo originate in the 1950s with the establishment of colleges for teaching cadres.

However, the year 1969 marks one of the most important developments in the higher education system in Kosovo, the establishment of the University of Pristina which enabled access to higher education in the Albanian language and which would generate a professional class that would become the pillar of the country's social and cultural development (Rexhaj & Pupovci, 2015).

However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the progress achieved in the area of higher education, was seriously challenged with the abolishment of Kosovo's autonomy. Albanian academics and students were expelled from universities and provision of higher education in the Albanian language was banned. The Albanians, despite the lack of resources, responded to this ban by organizing a parallel education system in general, including higher education as well, which eventually became a symbol of resistance and ensured the continuity of intellectual life under conditions of systematic exclusion (GAP Institute, 2007).

With the end of Kosovo's conflict in 1999, the reconstruction of the higher education system became one of the central objectives in Kosovo's reconstruction. Although Kosovo is not a formal signatory to the Bologna Process, the structure of Kosovo's higher education system is based on the Bologna principles, which includes a three-cycle system, a credit transfer system and quality assurance mechanisms that comply with the European Higher Education Area.

At this period, the University of Prishtina was the only higher education institution operating in Kosovo. However, soon after, many private providers of higher education started to be established and their number increased rapidly. By 2007, the number of higher education institutions reached the number of 30, out of which 24 were active. This growth was driven by the increasing number of students, increased demand, and limited capacities of one public provider (GAP Institute, 2007).

Later, between 2010 and 2014, the Kosovo government established five new public universities in five regions of Kosovo: Peja, Prizren, Gjakova, Gjilan, and Mitrovica. The reason for this decision was to decentralize higher education and to enable expanded access of students to Kosovo's regions (KAA, 2014).

The growth in the number of public and private higher education institutions highlighted the need for a coherent quality assurance framework to be established. Otherwise, the credibility of diplomas and public trust in academic qualifications could be jeopardised.

Early Development

To ensure this credibility of degrees and the public's trust in academic qualifications, the provisional government of Kosovo, supported by international partners, decided to establish the Kosovo Accreditation Agency. This decision was initially based on the Administrative Instruction 11/2004 on the Establishment of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (MESTI, 2004). But it was not until 2008, that KAA developed criteria and procedures for accreditation according to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

However, the first comprehensive evaluation of private providers of Higher Education in Kosovo took place in 2008, and was conducted by the British Accreditation Council (BAC), formally requested by the Minister of Education. This evaluation represents the first post-conflict evaluation in Kosovo. The report showed that the state of private providers in HE was quite fragmented and unregulated and highlighted the need for independent quality assurance mechanisms which are based on evidence. The recommendations from this report have had a direct impact on the institutionalization and strengthening of KAA (KAA, 2024).

In 2009, KAA became fully operational but every accreditation decision taken by the State Quality Council (SQC) had to be approved by the Government of the Republic of Kosovo which limited the functional independence of KAA. However, in 2011, the new Law on Higher Education was adopted and changed this practice making SQC/KAA the sole authority for accreditation decisions.

KAA was supported by many international projects dealing with capacity-building and they assisted in the design of accreditation procedures, the development of standards and the training and professional development of staff. The accreditation process applied the same criteria to all higher education institutions, whether public or private, ensuring full consistency and fairness. Standards for institutional and program evaluation that were developed were directly based on the ESGs and good practices from European agencies.

KAA's work helped in rebuilding public confidence in higher education, ensuring that all higher education institutions met the baseline quality requirements. Consequently, it brought KAA's membership in ENQA in 2014 and registration in EQAR in 2015. This demonstrated the substantial implementation of European standards and positioned Kosovo as an integral and credible participant within the European Higher Education Area.

On the other hand, the higher education institutions, themselves, began to develop their own internal quality assurance systems. In 2007, the University of Pristina, as the largest provider of higher education in Kosovo, supported by the OSCE, established a Quality Assurance Committee and a Quality Assurance Office. The Quality Assurance Office functioned as an independent unit within the Academic Development Office, and this office supported faculties and administrative units in drafting self-evaluation reports according to national and international regulations. After a year, in 2008, the university was able to conduct internal evaluations on a regular basis in faculties and programs in addition to external evaluations (GAP Institute, 2007).

This practice was followed by other HE providers so eventually all HEIs (public and private) established quality assurance offices and began to see external evaluation as a mechanism for quality improvement rather than control (ENQA, 2019).

Compromised Independence of KAA: The 2017–2018 Crisis

After a decade of KAA's establishment, a decade that was characterized by great achievements, the quality assurance system in Kosovo was challenged by political interference. During the period before 2017, it was noted by the State Quality Council (SQC) that many higher education institutions had received accreditation even though they had not met the requirements, especially the criteria related to the qualified academic staff. To this end, SQC began to conduct a more rigorous verification of academic credentials, which revealed and confirmed that a number of higher education institutions had engaged foreign professors although these professors were not working in Kosovo. Following this verification, the SQC decided to withdraw accreditation from some study programmes of both public and private higher education institutions.

These measures taken by SQC/KAA caused a lot of reaction and faced a major political intervention. In September 2017, the Minister of Education dismissed the entire KAA Board and the Acting Director of KAA. The reason for dismissal as stated by the Ministry was that there was some alleged classified information, regarding some irregularities in the process (EQAR, 2017). This political intervention was condemned as an illegal and non-transparent decision which led to the suspension of KAA's decision-making independence and also caused an institutional blockade that lasted seven months.

These developments raised many concerns and doubts among the European quality assurance bodies. Both ENQA and EQAR began to investigate the matter and subsequently concluded that KAA could

'no longer act autonomously' and was no longer able to function and be fully accountable after the dismissal of the board. This situation was in direct conflict with ESG standard 3.3 – Independence which states: *"agencies should be independent and act autonomously, having full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third-party influence."* (EQAR, 2017).

Consequently, in 2017, EQAR excluded KAA from the register and in February 2018 ENQA decided to drop its membership to 'member under review' status. Following a review by an international panel, in September 2019, ENQA completely removed KAA's membership due to non-implementation of the governance standards (ENQA, 2019). ENQA justified the removal of KAA with the lack of professional conduct, insufficient addressing of the recommendations from the 2014 review, and unclear role of KAA. According to ENQA, all of these had their source in the politization of KAA. The crisis caused showed and demonstrated that the quality assurance system in Kosovo, although technically competent, was affected by political instability (ENQA, 2019). The removal of KAA from ENQA/EQAR triggered numerous reactions, numerous social debates involving a variety of stakeholders, from the academic community, civil society to the politicians of the opposition parties and international partners (ORCA, 2022).

However, despite this difficult situation, KAA continued its efforts to work and implement the standards it had worked so hard to establish. Fortunately, KAA was not alone in this effort. The European Commission and ENQA supported KAA, describing its actions as 'difficult but fair, and consistent with KAA's mandate to ensure the highest level of quality in education (Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2018; ENQA, 2019).

Reinstatement Reforms: 2019-2025

Following 2019, KAA, together with its partners, undertook a series of legal, institutional and cultural changes which aimed to restore the independence, to professionalize the internal processes and to achieve the compliance with ESG standards (ENQA, 2024; KAA, 2024).

The most important aspect of the undertaken reforms was the consolidation of the legislative framework governing KAA. The adoption of the Law on the Kosovo Accreditation Agency in 2023 transformed KAA into an independent public body with functional autonomy from the Ministry of Education (MESTI, 2023). The provisions of this law addressed the weaknesses that were caused by the political interference of 2017 and 2018, when arbitrary decisions to dismiss the board from the ministry damaged the integrity of KAA. These provisions ensured transparent and merit-based procedures for the selection of members of the State Quality Council (SQC), which is now composed of representatives from academic community, students, employers and international experts. Further, by regulating mandates, with clear criteria for dismissal and approval of appointments by the Assembly of Kosovo, this law made it possible to protect KAA from political pressures (MESTI, 2023).

The Law on KAA also clarified the role of the Ministry of Education. According to this law, the Ministry is responsible for national strategies, policies and funding, but has no the right or authority to appoint or dismiss members of the SQC or to influence decisions on the accreditation of higher education institutions. This separation of responsibilities enabled a quality assurance system in which the Ministry sets policies, KAA conducts its professional evaluation function independently, while higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for their internal quality assurance (MESTI, 2023).

Measures have also been taken and work has been done to improve the operational level of KAA. KAA has undertaken a number of innovative initiatives that have greatly improved the quality and consistency of external evaluation processes. In this period, KAA launched the e-accreditation platform where every step that must be carried out by higher education institutions such as applications for re/accreditation,

evaluations and reporting, is done through this platform. This has ensured efficiency and transparency through a documentation that is transmitted from year to year.

KAA has also developed more advanced methodologies for follow-up and monitoring through which it aims to check the implementation of the recommendations and conditions given in the decisions for accreditation or re-accreditation. This transformed monitoring into a regular procedure based on evidence, which addresses one of the recommendations mentioned in previous reviews (ENQA, 2024). KAA also increased the number of administrative and professional staff, developed a plan for the professional development of staff and improved internal communication and coordination. These changes have been supported by several international projects funded by many donors that have helped and advanced the analytical and monitoring capacities of KAA (KAA, 2024).

At the same time, KAA became more committed to strengthening stakeholder involvement and public accountability. As mentioned above, student and employer representatives were added as members of the SQC, as well as international experts. Regular consultative meetings with higher education institutions began and became standard practice. Furthermore, KAA began organizing national conferences and workshops on quality assurance topics, which encouraged dialogue whereby the best practices were exchanged between institutions. Civil society organizations continued to play a very important monitoring role, ensuring a transparent and accountable process for the public.

All these measures are guided and foreseen in the 2021-2025 strategic plan, which sets out objectives and indicators aimed at institutional growth and the implementation of national best practices in line with European standards. The strategy also included the restoration of membership in ENQA and the EQAR register as key priorities.

However, there were some developments that were not in favour of KAA. In 2020, ENQA made changes to its statute whereby it restricted full membership to agencies that are from EHEA member states, which meant that KAA could not be a full member but could only be an affiliate member of ENQA. Despite this decision, due to the progress that KAA made during this period, KAA was still eligible to undergo ENQA's external reviews that were necessary for registration in EQAR.

The achieved progress was summarised in a report prepared by KAA in 2022 and submitted to ENQA addressing the recommendations made in 2019 external review, particularly in governance stability, in the engagement of stakeholders, and transparency, which confirmed that KAA had entered a new phase of institutional maturity (ENQA, 2019; ENQA, 2024). Two years later, in December 2024, KAA submitted the Self-Assessment Report and ENQA conducted the next external review.

The report prepared as a result of the review carried out by ENQA was then examined by the EQAR register committee at its meeting held on 26-27 June 2025 whereby it was decided to approve KAA's re-registration in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) until December 2029. Despite the fact that some standards failed to raise the level of compliance and remained at the level of partial compliance such as ESG 3.1 (activities, policies and processes), ESG 3.5 (Resources), and ESG 3.6 (Internal QA and professional conduct), EQAR concluded that progress has been made and this led to the much-awaited decision to return to the EQAR register (ENQA, 2024; EQAR, 2025). The table below shows KAA's compliance with the standards over the years 2019-2025.

Table 1: Overview of KAA's Compliance with ENQA/ESG Standards (2019–2025)

ESG Compliance level	ENQA - ESG Compliance level 2019	ENQA - ESG Compliance level 2025	EQAR Register Committee conclusion 2025
2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance	Substantially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose	Substantially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
2.3 Implementing processes	Partially compliant	Partial compliance	Compliance
2.4 Peer-review experts	Partially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
2.5 Criteria for outcomes	Substantially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
2.6 Reporting	Partially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
2.7 Complaints and appeals	Fully compliant	Compliance	Compliance
3.1 Activities, policy, and process for quality assurance	Partially compliant	Partial compliance	Partial compliance
3.2 Official status	Fully compliant	Compliance	Compliance
3.3 Independence	Substantially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
3.4 Thematic Analysis	Partially compliant	Compliance	Compliance
3.5 Resources	Partially compliant	Partial compliance	Partial compliance
3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct	Partially compliant	Partial compliance	Partial compliance
3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies	Fully compliant	Compliance	Compliance (by virtue of applying)

Source: ENQA (2019, 2024); EQAR (2025).

EQAR's decision to re-register KAA in the EQAR registry, despite some standards that remain partially met, demonstrated and proved that international trust has been restored in KAA's independence, transparency and professionalism, and at the same time made recommendations to ensure continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Since its establishment, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency has been committed to transform higher education in Kosovo by embracing a culture of transparency, accountability and continuous improvement. KAA's reinstatement in 2025 has marked the return of Kosovo's institutional credibility and maturity. The reforms carried out during 2020-2025 demonstrate that a sustainable quality assurance system depends on processes that are protected from political interference, that ensure sufficient resources and that foster and create a culture of openness.

Kosovo's case shows that a trustful quality assurance system requires political will, legal stability and professional integrity. KAA has demonstrated that independence and compliance with European standards are inseparable. Together they are the basis for public trust, academic excellence and Kosovo's rightful positioning in the European quality assurance community.

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