

A CASE STUDY OF EUROPEAN SKILL FORMATION IN ALBANIA



INDRIT VUÇAJ

A Case Study of European Skill Formation in Albania

A Case Study of European Skill Formation in Albania

Indrit Vuçaj

LEXINGTON BOOKS

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books

An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

Copyright © 2018 The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vuçaj, Indrit, author.

Title: A case study of European skill formation in Albania / Indrit Vuçaj.

Description: Lanham : Lexington Books, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018024743 (print) | LCCN 2018028143 (ebook) | ISBN 9781498575287

(Electronic) | ISBN 9781498575270 (cloth : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Vocational education—Albania. | Occupational training—Albania. | Professional education—Albania. | Skilled labor—Albania. | Skilled labor—European Union countries. |

Professional employees—Albania. | Professional employees—European Union countries.

Classification: LCC LC1047.A38 (ebook) | LCC LC1047.A38 V83 2018 (print) | DDC 370.113094965—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018024743>



TM The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to Albania, and to relentless pursuits of its people.

Contents

Preface

- 1 Introduction
- 2 European Skill Formation in Albania
- 3 Methods and Data
- 4 Discourse Analysis
- 5 Summary of Findings

References

Abbreviations

Appendices

Index

About the Author

Preface

This book is the revised version of a dissertation study submitted to the Graduate School of Teaching and Curriculum Leadership at Oklahoma State University. The study of Albania's journey to the European reforms of skill formation has illuminated my multifold understanding of Albania and its people in pursuit of the European dream to join the European Union. Most perplexing above all is Albania's convoluted, often frustrating and to a large extent seemingly impatient, approach to building deeply rooted and self-sustaining institutions that are capable of formulating policies at par with its European partners.

As the need to develop competent and knowledgeable societies rises to become competitive and retain useful skills for the labor market, universities, vocational schools, and preparatory academies are charged with the preliminary tasks to develop applicable skills whereas the state institutions sketch policies that ensure fair and equitable distribution of employment opportunities. The expansion of the European Union and its member states' policies remain by far the most influencing practices in Europe in general, and in Albania in particular. The progressive approaches of the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes are serving as benchmarks for other nations to align with the EU-incepted and -driven reforms. In combination, they provide a remarkable method of preparation for the labor market. The newly developed method of the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes transcends qualifications and effectively applies learning in varying context and substance. While technological advancements have replaced certain manual and repetitive skills, the European skill formation provides the means to address and reorient the basic skills by upgrading and reorienting the labor market to a more highly advanced state of competency level. Nevertheless, the disparity between what "was," what "is," and what "can be" is almost nowhere else more prevalent than it is in Albania. This case study is the genesis of

exploring and navigating the web of Albania's Europeanization process in skill formation. Specifically, it systematically disseminates the influential process of the European skill formation system in Albanian educational reforms, and it positions the progress of educational reforms in Albania in the spectrum of transnational developments. Additionally, it examines the framework of the European skill formation, intended processes for adopting nations, local organizational layers of policymaking institutions, and the threading progress of developing a locally employable and potentially foreign-exportable labor market. In essence, Albania's endeavors of educational reforms and policymaking succumb toward the international trends of developing quality excellence education, offer mobility opportunities, an interconnected internationalization, able to find employment, aligned with a qualification framework, and capable of acknowledging prior learning.

The arduous, multi-yearlong academic endeavor of this work would not have come to light without the financial, moral, emotional, and intellectual support of a number of individuals and institutions in Albania and in the United States. First, a special gratitude is extended to my committee members who have devoted countless hours of reading my manuscripts and provided invaluable advice for completing this work. Their guidance during this journey has exemplified healthy collegial relationships and challenging discussions meant to solidify learning and strengthen reasoning. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Mary Jo Self for persisting in completion of this work and accepting to coach, mentor, and prepare me with the necessary skills and means to succeed in academic appointments; Dr. Benjamin Bindewald for patiently and carefully reading my drafts repeatedly and teaching me the powerful notion of writing with "epistemic humility" that otherwise would not have been possible to infer the claims in this work; Dr. Qiuying Wang for her unconditional beholden beliefs in my work as a colleague and in me as an individual, and for adopting me as her "academic child" to fundamentally challenge my perspectives by teaching me the value of expressing and defending my opinions; and Dr. Toni Ivey for (1) introducing me to carefully assess the applicability and feasibility of my favorite methodology in research work, and (2) her unrelenting sacrifices to be available for assistance in any capacity. Their long-standing support during my graduate studies is nothing short of extraordinary. Their academic rigor has taught me to make

excellence a repeated habit and has given me the patience to challenge my individual assumptions. Second, I am indebted to the College of Education and Edmond Low Library staff at Oklahoma State University for orchestrating the financial and administrative support of this work. They have illustrated the application of stewardship in practice. The innumerable hours spent on finding original copies of rare books and resources stored in libraries halfway across the world have shown the unwavering commitment to successful completion of this work. I am also thankful to the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Tirana in Albania for allowing me to hold a lectureship about this dissertation's topic during my travel to Albania. Their professional hospitality has demonstrated the best that Albania has to offer in its professional academic network. Third, I owe a great deal of gratitude to other people who have helped bring this work to completion: to my participants for their readiness to assist with this project as this line of this book would not have been written without them; to Dr. Stephen Wanger for helping me see a different conceptual perspective of my work and ultimately shape my research design uniquely to Albania; to Dr. Starla Halcomb for allowing me to spend a considerable work time to support claims in this book; to Dr. Ann Dugger for her emotional and situational guidance, but more importantly for uplifting spirits during our conversations; to Dr. Robert Davis and Dr. Jennifer Sanders for the administrative support; to OSU College of Education faculty for the moral support; to my writing workshop friends and colleagues for holding me accountable for my progress; and to Starbucks baristas for fueling my morning and evening coffee addiction. Fourth, a special thank you to Joseph Parry, editor at Lexington for helping and supporting me patiently to publish this book, and more importantly for opening the unknown case of Albania to the world.

Lastly and most notably, I owe to the graciousness of my family. I owe all of my life accomplishments to my parents Fadil and Liljana Vucaj for instilling in me the foundational pillars of education. Their vision of the value of education and their unconditionally encompassing support has fundamentally changed the role I play in society and has provided the spectrum of what a genuine and supportive parent-child relationship looks and should look like. Similarly, I owe this accomplishment to Ana and to her uncomfortable sacrifices to see me succeed. Her wits have been instrumental in providing moral and emotional support at difficult times. Her heartfelt and

authentic commitment is beyond description. Their sacrifices for this book have shown the extent of their love, and their influence has changed my life.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings

This chapter reviews the unearthed findings of this study on how the ESFS finds applicability in the education and training reforms in Albania in attempts to unifying the schism between HE and VET. The findings are presented in light of the research questions¹ and discuss the theoretical and research implications in the application of adopting and adapting the European reform systems on a national scale in Albania. The findings attempt to succinctly identify factors surrounding the aims of the ESFS, and its application in the Albanian national reforms of education and training system by providing a conceptual application framework of ESFS in Albania. The study adds to the ongoing emergent process of aligning the education and training system to the local needs and consequently, if broadly effective, to a larger scale in the global economy. The application benefactors of this study remain field experts and policymakers, mainly in Albania, with keen expertise and knowledge of the local labor market and the education and training system to employ the findings in effective and relevant ways of delineating the alignment of goals and objectives of ESFS with the Albanian education reforms in the development of its skill formation system. A second added contribution to this study is the holistic approach of ESFS in localizing areas in policy governance requiring either impromptu development of new policies or enhancing progress in already existing strategies. Specifically, this inquiry is particularly well-suited to contribute to the growing body of literature on the development of education reforms that fuel employability among the participating members of the EU.² Ultimately, the findings strive to shed details and insights of the ESFS in the Albanian educational reforms, and become a genesis point for field practitioners³ in grasping the intents of ESFS and assist with the appropriate design of programs⁴ to align the

intended goals of ESFS with the complexities of the Albanian rhetoric and reality.

In the past two and a half decades, Albania has attempted to maintain in balance the transition from an isolationist impoverished nation relying mostly on the agricultural sector to a democratic nation hopeful of cherishing private enterprise in the free market. Unequivocally, this attempt has offered gained and lost opportunities for the education and training system. In one end of the pendulum, instead of reforming institutions of education and training system to adapt congruently with the demand in the labor market, the majority dilapidated, and consequently prolonged the ability to acquire the necessary skills to remain effective in dynamic economies of the free market. Hence, opportunities lost. On the other end of the pendulum, the ability to restructure institutions of learning and training from origins of previously understood experiences or commonly accepted institutional disciplinary practices has generated potential alternatives to adjust more narrowly in the inception of a modern education and training system more in line with the local needs. Thus, opportunities gained. For policymakers, the leveraging instrument for imbuing balance between the generation of new opportunities and the preservation of the existing ones has been—and it still is even more so today—the European reforms of the EU. Despite the sizable support stemming in myriad ways⁵, whether by foreign stakeholders such as international institutions in monetary proceeds or by charitable entrepreneurial undertakings, there is little impactful relevance to the local needs.⁶

The findings of this study offer a fairly realistic assessment of institutional components as derived relative to their standing to the neoliberalist approach of global economy. The data stock comprised trips to Albania, archival research and interviews indicate that implementation of institutional components pertinent to the aims of European reforms is conciliating in varied capacities.⁷ The regulative restructuring of institutional layers appears most pacifying, and understandably so considering that regulative structures tend to reorganize fairly quickly within the hierarchical power structure. Next, norms and values stand at odds in placement of the European reforms. Grand desires and super dreams are no substitutes to organizational norms of establishing viable objectives.⁸ Lastly, the European culture and its inherent cognitive dimensions are making an unlikely lasting impression to Albanians

and their governing institutions.⁹ Similar to regulative dimensions, this is fully understandable for uniquely opposite reasons. If regulative institutional dimensions foster reorganization conducted in executive orders issued in signing of EU nation state and adopting members, culturally cognitive institutional dimensions are merely suggestive of a culturally rich country that has endured ferocity for thousands of years. This perspective indicates a necessity in terms of time to absorb the newly developing institutional structures stemming from a new cultural foundation. I foresee progress, and a complete transformation I suspect may take generations.

STOCKING PROGRESS

The arduous journey of Albanian institutions of education and training from the early 1990s to the present is remarkably exceptional.¹⁰ The switch from a dictatorship to a liberal society has literally brought drastic changes in every sphere of life.¹¹ More uniquely so is the tedious,¹² and to a certain extent, unpleasant journey of the education and training system.¹³ Prior to becoming a free society, Albania held its education and training system in high regards with the majority of the population¹⁴ participating in various sectors requiring skills acquired after completion of early education. This meant that Albania capitalized its manpower to engage productively with the global economy. A well-trained population meant broader range of skills to produce certain goods and services, and consequently greater opportunities to engage with the global market.¹⁵

The ultimate drawback to this approach however remained the inability to export labor and skill, and stay limited to goods demanded by the global economy and services required by the local needs, thus narrowly establishing a skill formation system supporting local application of skills for local services and to a large extent fulfill global needs for exported Albanian goods. The early inception of liberal takeover produced dissimilar results. The physical damage of infrastructure and the noticeable lack of state investments in latest technological advances geared the education and training system to complete depletion and endangered its basic functioning abilities. This setback disorganized the orientation of the education and training system, and it introduced Albania to a challenging road ahead of the capitalistic economy including adjustment of its workforce to the newly

developed demands of the local labor market. The unharmonious dislodging of the education and training system in the communist regime to an efficacious model of education and training for the modern society with no synchronization between the available resources already in place serving to a centrally planned economic system and modern advancements designed to respond to a market-oriented economic system in the beginning of the twentieth century diminished the value of acquiring skills relevant for the newest form of governance.

The crevasse, or “transition” as local voices insist,¹⁶ concerning the changing demands of the labor market and the lack of resources to reskill the labor market appeared detrimental in forecasting the future of education and training system.¹⁷ In this context, free market monetary opportunities gained precedence over the long-term benefits of applying acquired skills in the labor market. The culmination of this phenomenon occurred in 1997 when the wealth of Albanians disappeared in pyramid schemes and plunged the economic system to major national revolts that submerged the country into chaos. Unfortunately, until then no relevant significance was given to the national education and training system. It is arguable that the locus of concentration in policymaking in Albania remained largely in generating financial opportunities for Albanians and possibly on the expense of predicated sustainable and long-term sound policy decisions in the education and training system reforms.

Two years later, commencing in 1999 until early 2001, Albania’s economic system suffered yet another dysfunctional disarray of the labor market from migrant population crossing the Albanian border to escape the war-motivated slaughtering crisis in Kosovo.¹⁸ The refugee crisis escalated the need to engender policies to sustain local needs for Albanians in Albania and assist newly arrived immigrants immerse into the Albanian culture including accustoming abilities to find employment in the local labor market. In essence, policies were developed to boost the economic power of the country at the time and sustain its continuation with the training of the human capital. Ideal on paper and obfuscated at best in practice.

A few years later, the Albanian governing institutions commenced signing a series of binding covenants, whereas some argued bilateral¹⁹ while others unilateral,²⁰ including among them the transformation of the education and

training landscape. These covenants, as explained in chapter 2, reconfigured the education and training system and inspired to join as a member state of the EU. The vicissitudes are arguably most assuaging objectives aiming to enjoin the EU at the time of occurrence. Despite the benevolent intents of transforming the education and training system, the great desire to modernize its technologies to respond to the needs of the local labor market as well as in line with the European reforms, and the presently recurring reforms, a retrospective indicates and confirms a unidimensional approach to adopting and adapting the European reforms merely on theoretical level. Thus, it is logical to maintain such adaptation not only is inefficacious when there is a distinct shortage of resources to sustain a highly effective system elsewhere embedded with abundant resources, but also short-lived and demands intermittent interventions in rotating cycles without near- or long-end goals. Subsequently, the current incongruity of the labor market demands and the education and training system is attuning to local voices and attributed to policies fostering an overflow production of economists, journalists, and lawyers with no specified application of knowledge.

DISLODGING ESFS

The first question of this study aimed to explore and investigate quality excellence in content areas, student, faculty, and staff mobility, globalized and interconnected experiences, employability, qualification frameworks across EU in relative to Albania, and recognition of prior learning in informing the shaping of national skill formation system reforms. The response to this question arose multifold positioning ESFS addressing a variety of elements such as quality excellence, mobility, globalization, employability, qualification framework, and recognition of prior learning. As it pertains to quality excellence, numerous institutional changes have occurred. In particular, there have been initiatives to discern and distinguish gifted and talented students by establishing NES, a nationally recognized program of gifted and talented students. Separation of duties of responsibilities between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth to focus more narrowly on the labor market. The development of accreditation criteria aiming to enhance quality standards are the first steps.

The inception of national Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (PAAHE) assist the accreditation process of HE institutions in accordance with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The NAVETQ is the catalyst supporter of the National Support Service for European Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) specifically to VET programs. NAVETQ's aim is to develop and maintain the national register of professions and standards, accreditation of professional qualifications in accordance with the Albanian Professional Formation (APF) standards, EQF and the EU Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET). The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) standards are the prerequisite standards aiming to employ vehemently throughout the country. Mobility influences how learners acquire knowledge and apply it freely throughout Europe.²¹ While the concept is highly beneficial to all participating actors, there are barriers in employing it effectively. Learner's struggles with affording programs in various countries remains a concern for policymakers in employing it effectively. The legal framework supporting mobility is oftentimes inadequate as it lacks recognition and transferability of learning in other contexts. Tempus and Erasmus+ programs are pillars of mobility and provide funding to schooling institutions to assist pedagogical staff in various training and developments programs in Europe.

Engaging globally in competitive market is the aim of policymaking institutions. The necessary skills required to compete globally are fueled by the guidelines delineated in the EQF. The EQF guidelines are the principles instituting reform changes; standards for acquiring skills are however developed by national strategies. While EQF informs the overarching guidelines, EQAVET informs the specificities in reforms. In pertaining to advancement and progress of reform, Cedefop is the promoting authority ensuring reform achievements as expressed in EQAVET. When it comes to employability concerns, European Training Foundation (ETF) is the informing authority of helping transitioning countries, as is the case with Albania, harness and fulfill the human capital to its fullest capacities. ETF influence has come in the variety of manners by developing, implementing, and assessing the implementation of the small business act for Europe; employing professional development program for VET teachers; establishing

aims and achievements aiming to complete by the Riga conference conclusion in 2015; supporting strategically a vision framework for human resources development; and assessing transferability of skills in other European countries.

The EQFs are perhaps the most significant undertakings that policymakers have taken upon for adaptation. EQF is the main pillar of regulating levels of learning informing the AQF. BP for HE and CP for VET are the supporting mechanisms aiming to close the gap between Albania and EU's preparation systems. These two systems are the foundations providing guidelines for each enlarging member. Standards for each preparatory system are informed by EQAVET and ENQA for VET and HE, respectively. The recognition of prior learning is by far a concerning issue. Thus far, there is no evidence supporting influence when it comes to recognition of learning. The support of prior learning is a theme that is affected by its inapplicability due to lack of formal governance and market orientation. Lack of formal governance lacks institutional formalization required for recognition, while market orientation supports transition between HE and VET. When transition occurs, prior learning is often considered a loss. Institutional organisms regulating transferability of learning between HE and VET seem to have little to no influence by any standard. Lifelong learning is yet to be applied in either HE or VET fields.

Knowledge and entrepreneurship is a major topic covering various areas of content. There is a triangle of education, innovation, and research. The triangle angles are however diminutive and fragile. The EQF is the primary informant influencing the standards when it comes to education, research, and innovation. European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is an auxiliary informant aiming to standardize knowledge according to European framework and transfer it to the European context. In the case of VET preparation, preparation orientation leans toward learning outcomes. The increased performance of learning in numerous VET schools, and the autonomous management approach indeed enhance the learning outcomes streamlining the Albanian system to the European system. As knowledge measures consistent with ECVET for VET and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) for HE, readability of credit transfer is by far eased. Establishment of ECVET and ECTS standards in the fields of VET and HE, respectively, increase knowledge production,

research investigation, and enhance innovation. When it comes to emulating or borrowing elements found in other countries' systems of education, there is no distinct determination regarding what works, borrowed from where, if it works, and if so, to what extent. Specific German-speaking countries such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are heavily involved in various projects ranging from a few HE programs to mostly VET programs. The influence they bring is multidimensional.²² In specific events, as discussed earlier in this chapter, they replicate elements which work well in respective societies. Whether the application of a dual education system, mere theoretical delivery, or sole apprenticeship (on-the-job) learning is yet a topic for determination of successful implementation. Despite German-speaking countries' influences, there is substantial influence infused in HE programs. Most, if not all, HE programs are influenced by the Anglo-Saxon model of education. For instance, NAVETQ, a state governing institution governs similarly to Scottish Qualification Authority. Whether emulated models are considered a success or failure is yet in the preliminary works. Initial evidence however has revealed that a uniquely Albanian system may be the most appropriate solution, taking into context the Albanian culture and its supporting industry sectors.

European influence is without a doubt the main, and arguably, the sole driver of reforms in Albania. Whether programs are financed or sponsored by the EU, they are all implemented in hopes of closing the schism between European and Albanian model of education. The European influence stems in numerous ways. Projects financed by the EU are the main way. Institutional consultancy of state institutions via paid third-party providers such as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), a German-contracted organization focusing on economic development and employment is a second major way. Other influences stemming from a variety of fields include the aforementioned projects provided by USAID, ADA, SIDA, NORAD, and EDA among other minor projects.

VALIDATING RATIONALE

The second question of this study seeks to uncover how the understanding of ESFS has fueled the formation of Albanian national skill formation system. Specifically, the question pursues the rationale to help with the development

rationale of the skill formation, and the answer relies on institutional pillars of governing institutions. The answer to this question takes structural and practical level responses.

In terms of a structural level, as stated elsewhere in this chapter, EQF is the key instrument guiding the bridge between European qualifications framework and AQF. Accordingly, EQF provides guidance in establishing the structural level of learning outcomes in AQF. The AQF is a comprehensive eight-level framework inferring learning outcome objects from EQF. In this framework, three types of qualifications are discerned: general qualification in the secondary school levels 1 through 4; higher qualification provided by universities or research centers in levels 5 through 8; vocational qualifications provided by VET schooling institutions or workplace learning in levels 2 through 5. [Table 5.1](#) is a representation of AQF structural levels and associated descriptor levels pertaining to each level and the typical years of schooling association with each level.

Table 5.1 Albanian Qualification Framework Structural Levels

AQF Level	Minimum Qualifications		Qualifications by Structure		Typical Years of Schooling			
	General Education	Vocational Education	General Education	Vocational Education	General Education	Vocational Education		
1	Ability to engage civically or work		Civic or work engagement					9
2	General qualification	General qualification/ vocational qualifications	Study programs/short-term courses (Level 1)	Study/ training program (Level 1)	3	2	2	4
3			Study programs/short-term courses (Level 2)	Study/ training program (Level 2)				1
4			General education diploma/ study programs/short-term Courses (Level 3)	Vocational education diploma/ study programs/ professional certificate		1	2	
5	Higher qualifications	Vocational qualifications	Study programs/professional diploma	Study programs/ professional certification	2	2	2	2
6			Bachelor programs/ university degree	Professional study programs/ university degree	3	3	3	3
7			Master's program/university degree	Professional study programs/ post-bachelor specialization	2	2	2	2
8			Doctoral program/university degree	Professional study programs/post-masters' degree/ specialization	2	2	2	2

Source: Author's illustration.

As it pertains to the practical deployment of the process, a series of projects aim to enhance the implementation of EQF. While much of the work occurs

in structural level, the practical deployment levels remain by far ambiguous. Even though the development of AQF is linking the Albanian national strategy to the EQF, a practical employment strategy is yet undetermined (Cedefop, 2015b). One aspect encountering a series of difficulties is social engagement by learners. In this context, social imagery encourages attendance of HE and very rarely supports VET programs.²³ In spite of a rigorous multidisciplinary educational preparation for the VET fields as well as intellectual fulfillment of HE, full practical embracement for the policymakers to employ with the intent of benefiting learners is yet a reality. In this context, institutional practices in providing practical opportunities are existent, yet loosely defined due to a significant lack of social interest. ECVET is the second key instrument informing validation and recognition of work competencies across participating members. In this context, ECVET assists mobility while ensuring the credit earned in other countries are indeed recognized in the learner's country of origin. In this aspect, the practical deployment of mobility remains an undisputable challenge from various perspectives. The lack of finances from learners and institutions supporting learning otherwise is a persistent hindrance. When it comes to utilizing national and international programs aimed at increasing mobility of learners and pedagogical staff alike, there are specific cases evidencing the use of programs. In the documented cases of program utilization, there is evidence of both usability and underutilization of recognition of credits earned in different systems and countries. Widespread use of these programs however is yet in the genesis phases. Besides finances and compatibility issues, data suggest a tendency of inferiority in acquired skills in the European scale. That is, capability in performing up to par with the European technologies requires further advanced training that learners are currently unable to absorb with technologies found in Albanian formation institutions.

Quality excellence in Albania is informed, at least in theoretical level, by the EQAVET, which is the only EU-sponsored instrument designed to assist enlarging countries promote and monitor the progress of their formation system. The application of assuring quality in formation system is a mission in need of accomplishment. The first step toward quality excellence is the institutional divide of responsibilities between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth when it comes to skill formation

system. New responsibilities charge the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, almost exclusively, in aligning the formation system to the labor market. The apparent pitfall stemming from the institutional divide is the lack of pedagogical context in the acquisition of skills by the learners. Criteria for quality program excellence are either inexistent or undefined. The labor market however deliberately participates in creating excellence programs toward specific fields. Effectiveness of employing quality excellence programs in HE or VET is mostly driven by the legal framework in the Albanian NESS, and a series of education acts²⁴ requiring schooling institutions affirm to EQF standards as outlined in the AQF. ETF is the official body of assistance helping European developing countries' transition and harness the capacities of human capital. Under this motto, ETF is extensively vested in the qualifying interest of human capital in Albania to engage in the European labor market. Incongruence between what the labor market demands and the skills learners are able to provide are affecting employment in the labor market. Training and qualifications with technologies outdated by the labor market require learners continue upskilling their abilities for the labor market. Additionally, despite the equivalency of skills credits employed in the Albanian skill formation system, work placement programs and certification of qualification issued by the skill formation institutions in Albania find rather sporadic use in the labor market. Field requiring highly specialized knowledge have a greater chance of employment in the EU labor market, although at a lower rank, than fields that require certification for basic knowledge skills.

EQF is the officiating authority guiding employability skills in Albania. While EQF serves as a reference point for AQF, definition of what employs a learner is undefined. In this context, there are numerous challenges stemming from institutional and social spheres. Systemic and continuous communication between institutional agencies in different areas of skill formation system lack coordinating substance. Social aura on the other hand fails to view educational preparation as the necessary means to join the labor markets. HE particularly holds a special status, and it is widely encouraged for attendance whether or not pursuit studies lead to employment. Certification of knowledge informs hiring practices more so for the public sector than for the private sector. While employability means knowledge

certification and qualification as the means to employment, the private sector views capabilities to perform duties and responsibilities as the primary determinant in employment. The mismatch between the supply of learners and the demand for labor is the leading factor that private organizations provide in-house training and development programs. According to Cedefop (2015b), validation of recognition of prior learning is conducted in four phases: (1) identification of individual's learning outcomes, (2) documentation of individual's learning outcomes, (3) assessment of individual's learning outcomes, and (4) certification of individual's learning outcomes. In this context, application of recognizing prior learning is a relatively new concept for Albania. Even though the RPL network facilitates RPL and informs EU enlarging members, prior learning is by far ignored, and consequently its influence to policymaking institutions is little to absent. A transferability formula translating prior learning into schooling credits is nonexistent. The application of prior learning in the admission process of schooling programs offers a slight advantage in specific fields. Specializing fields sharing specific knowledge (i.e., health care and medical field; electric technician and electrical engineering; mathematics and engineering) acknowledge dearly prior acquired learning. Current AQF platform ignores prior learning. Newly emerging legal framework expected to reveal in the next upcoming calendar year plans considering prior learning a school credit-worthy endeavor.

The development of knowledge and entrepreneurship abilities are complex and it is best explained by dissecting the legal framework. The inception and deployment of a legal framework consistent with EQF is the emerging rationale fueling Albania's skill formation system. This framework attempts to include comprehensively, at least in theoretical level, emergence of various learning outcomes as delineated in EQF. Structurally, it assists the development of various institutional agencies ranging from quality assurance to credit equivalence and generation of research and innovation. The complexities of practical deployment of terms in the legal framework from institutional state level to institutional schooling practices are explained by the following third question.

RAISING THE BAR

The third question of this study strives to unravel whether or not, and if so to what extent have the policy implementation effects increased educational standards in relation to other EU member states and the degree of alignment between the Albanian educational standards and the European and international standards. The response to this question is by no means an easy task and certainly tentative. Nonetheless, a reasonable attempt to shed light is warranted. Therefore, the response to this question is provided in chunks of information to allow discerning complexities to become known.

Speaking from a structural and theoretical level perspective, numerous agreements between state institutions and the EU have reconfigured the landscape of skill formation system. Legal framework fueled by numerous education acts led educational landscape reconfiguration. The inception of AQF, a model resemble of EQF, is by far the highest achievements in closing the schism between the Albanian and the European education system. The development of state institutional agencies consistent with European agencies for similar responsibilities is a strong commitment to reconfiguring the structure of the Albanian education system. In HE, ENQA's vision translated into the development of PAAHE for HE programs. Additionally, ECTS's goals transpired establishment of a credit system and the ease of readability from Albania to other countries and vice versa. NAVETQ is an umbrella agency covering various aspects of AQF's mission. Specifically, NAVETQ is informed by EQAVET standards for the VET system. Additionally, it employs Cedefop standards as a conduit of embedding EQAVET standards in national reforms. Moreover, it maintains the equivalency of the credit system consistent with ECVET. Furthermore, the governing and operational framework resembles the Scottish Qualification Framework. The movement supporting inception of research centers in HE and aligning VET programs to the labor market demands as well as the autonomous and self-dependent financing are key pointers of aligning Albanian education to the European education standards.

In this context, the structural reconfiguration brings new responsibilities for governing state institutions. Even though structural changes are able to sustain some of the new duties and responsibilities, more work remains for substantial advancements. More specifically, recognition of prior learning is inapplicable in any state or schooling institutions. In addition, there is no evidence of either state or schooling institutions supporting systematically

integrated program of VET and HE preparation. Sporadic participation in mobility programs is lacking consistent engagement and consequently stemming with participation. Currently, state governing institutions are incapable of absorbing all mobility programs provided by the EU. Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig, and Jean Monnet are among other mobility-enhancing programs sponsored by EU available for participation; however, these programs are yet unable for absorption in state reforms.

Albania's structural attempts to align educational standards with the European educational standards are without a doubt worthy of praise. In this process, however, reformation is either partial or missing altogether. While assurance of quality, equivalency of credit system, and program accreditation are supported by sole-standing state structures, mobility is supported by sporadic programs while prior learning lacks total inclusion. As it pertains to measurement of employability because of the embedding of the European standards into the Albanian educational standards, the implications are far more extensive. Despite the complexity, however, there is evidence suggesting that Albanians are more prone to be employable in Europe than with the previous Albanian standards. Specifically, certification of knowledge in Albania is consistent with certification of knowledge in any European country that is a member of EU because of the implementation of the European standards. In this context, Albanians have greater opportunities for employment in Europe than they previously had.

Additionally, alignment of the Albanian standards with the European standards has created spaces of employment in terms of individual willingness. That is, mass employment immigration is yet to occur or even be qualified consistent with the skills that the foreign labor market demands. Instead, the majority of the skills gained in teaching institutions are suited particularly for the local labor market. The European standards tend to favor the curriculum streamline between the skills taught in learning institutions and the skills demanded by the labor market. Hence, provided that the skills are particular to each country's labor market, depending on specialty or subsidies provided the most, it is only logical to believe that an improvement in the quality of teaching and the acquisition of skills is a reflected result in the local labor market. The same claim however cannot be made for European or other foreign markets. Under these circumstances, the extension of the education standards alignment seems to have an effective influence on

the local labor market and a rather limited effect on foreign labor markets.

Contextualization is another perspective offering insights on the extent of the alignment between the Albanian education standards and the European standards. In this respect, several national schools are funded and run by foreign projects whether that is EU-sponsored or individually sponsored for private interests. The programs in these schools tend to cater to the local market provided and delivered using foreign methods. These methods are beyond the scope of this study nor are they relevant and are not discussed here. However, data indicates that while the skills obtained by learners are in alignment with the labor market, the delivery modes and the technologies used are imported. Most prominent imports originate from Scotland, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. These technologies are attempts to close the schism between Albanian and European standards, and naturally, they domesticate similar learning modes and emulate similar learning models that generated from the origins of their country. Hence, it is fairly conclusive that importation of new technologies and learning models is affecting learning outputs, and consequently, conjoining the Albanian educational standards to the European standards.

Competency of skills appears to play a prominent role in aligning the Albanian standards with the European standards. More specifically, evidence suggests that the labor market seeks competency-based skills and no mere qualifications simply certifying knowledge. Congruent with this indication, the learning institutions are concurrently adjusting curriculum consistent with competencies. Many times, the changing competencies are dictating the types of programs and curriculums offered in learning institutions. The alignment of the curriculum to the labor market is a particular characteristic of the European educational standards. Hence, interpretation of changing curriculum in learning competencies congruent with the changing dynamics of competencies may indicate that competency-based learning and training may be an embedded European trademark in the Albanian educational standards.

Despite the complexities, Albania seems to make considerable progress toward the European educational standards. The evidence suggests that progress appears to stem from a variety of perspectives which take into account the local labor market. Consequently, the progress focuses on aligning the skills acquired in the learning institutions with the skills

demand in the labor market. As it pertains to the foreign labor markets, there is no evidence suggesting that Albanian educational standards are systematically providing qualified labor or that certification of labor skills provided by the Albanian learning institutions are indicative of employability. Instead, evidence suggests sporadic cases, and the sporadic cases are the exception, not the norm. Whether Albania is willing and able to extend its influence in the labor market beyond the country is an issue that requires another inquiry on its own.

IMPLICATIONS

In addition to understanding the development of ESFS in Albania, a desired outcome of this study is to gain insights about the practical, theoretical, and research inferences of ESFS components in Albanian educational reforms. Although findings may be limited in generalizability, they nonetheless adequately and pertinently address the intended purposes as well as the desired outcomes. The following paragraphs describe the insinuations this study may have for practice, theory, and current or future research. Additionally, several recommendations are offered for policy and decision-making. All these issues are discussed in the following.

Implications for Theory

According to Scott (1995), institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures that provide stability and meaning to social behavior (p. 33). The regulative pillar supports explicit regulative processes such as rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities (Scott, 1995, p. 35; 2001, pp. 51–52; 2008; 2014, p. 56). In this respect, Albania has achieved remarkable results. The inception of AQF in accordance with EQF and the development of new institutional structures that bear duties and responsibilities in accordance with the European structures are evidence that Albania has largely employed the regulative aspects of institutions. However, the successful deployment of regulative elements is not very surprising. According to Gruber (2000), the powerful influences the weak even when it does not intend to do so by dictating a government's policy choice in a way that challenges the status quo it faces. Hence, under this context in retrospect, it is relatively certain to assume that EU exerts, whether directly or indirectly, influence over Albania for its policy choice since Albania's hallmark goal for

the past quarter century from the early 1990s is to join the EU community.

The normative pillar, which introduces a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension (Scott, 1995, p. 37; 2001, p. 54) through values and norms, results in mixed messages for Albania. In terms of values, which are the conceptions of the desired outcome with development of new standards for current institutions (Scott, 1995), the results suggest the values not only apply well but they are also congruent with the theoretical values placed in existing institutions. The reformation process and the state-sponsored reforms specifically designed to amplify the relationship between the Albanian and the European standards are evidence suggesting that values not only matter but also appropriate actions are taken.

In terms of norms, which specify how things should get done and define the means to pursue ends (Scott, 1995), the results do not provide an understanding nor grounds to pursue how specifically the relationship between the Albanian and the European standards is amplified when it comes to the educational reforms. For a healthy normative system, goals and aims are clearly defined and the specific ways on how to pursue goals and objectives are designated (Scott, 1995). Pertinent to this relationship, the implication suggest that Albania has partly fulfilled elements of an effective normative system, and those elements define goals and objectives through the values elements but not through the designation of ways to pursue goals and objectives through the norms elements. These results however are again not surprising. Boli-Bennett and Meyer (1978) show that most countries change educational and human policies not when they are ready to do so but rather when they are influenced by the global norms. In this context, it may be possible that Albania is influenced by the global European norms to establish a European-sponsored skill formation system, but it is unable to sustain it successfully when it comes to the norms elements to define the ways specifically on how to support in a way that it is successful.²⁵

Lastly, the cognitive pillar, which addresses and establishes the rules that constitute reality and the meaning frames (Scott, 1995, p. 40; 2001, p. 57), appears murkier than the regulative and normative pillars. The cognitive pillar stresses the central role that common meaning plays in societally constructed meanings (Scott, 1995) and the subsumed meaning that general orders are objectively and subjectively real (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In

this respect, when over 93 percent of the Albanian population supports integration of Albania into the EU (Gallup Balkan Monitor, 2010) and every single governing state institution considers it the highest priority (Djurovic, 2013; Kajsiu, 2006, 2010; Schmidt-Neke, 2007, 2015; Xhaferri, 2008), it is only natural to infer subjectively that the integration of Albania to the EU is a long-held endeavor that touches the souls of millions. Similar to this assumption, data supports the integration of Albania to the EU. Objectively, this assumption is challenged in the manner in which the country generates specific ways toward the EU with the reformation process. This dichotomy is best described by country's social identity changes, and they are described as follows.

Albania has been attempting to transform its educational and training system for the past quarter century (Mullahi & Dhimitri, 2015; Nikaj, 2015; OECD, 2016a; Schmidt-Neke, 2015) and the Europeanization of the education and training system is one among these transformations. Thus, emulation of the European system of skill formation system is inevitable. Specifically, Albania is trying to transform its educational and training landscape by instituting ESFS in its educational reform process. In doing so, institutions are replicating European structures. The replication of structures will inevitably lead to mimicking processes and eventually to an alienating culture. Thus far, it is only reasonable to deter that Albania is following a mimetic process of imitating other nations that it regards as successful. This practice is fairly typical for developing nations to coordinate policies by following the behavior of powerful nations by virtue or salience (Dobbin et al., 2007, p. 456).

By the same token, it is arguable that the alienation process in Albania of structures, processes, and much less of cultures is stalling due to a cultural collision between the Eastern- and Western-European societal settings. Specifically, the transition from an Eastern-centered society toward a Western-European-centered society is differentiating actors and associated ways of acting in ways that require explanations. Eastern-centered societies, which Albania is one among them, celebrates and cherishes interdependent and less autonomous networks, while Western-centered societies such as the EU accord greater independence and more autonomous behavior (Scott, 1995, 2001, 2008). Hence, in the midst of this collusion such as incepting, developing, and formulating a Western-centered educational and training

system policy such as ESFS, it is inevitable that the same forces and actors that act as agents of change for the cultural and process changes may also serve as barriers for the same reasons. Case in point is AQF. While AQF may resemble EQF in structure and process, it may also fail to transfer the intended purposes. This may explain why for the past two decades, Albanian education and training system is yet to perform at par to the European standards. A second example is the credit system. The convergence of a credit system in Albanian education and training institutions that is recognizable and transferrable within the EU does not per se translate into more skillful preparation. Although there is a mimic process occurring at different capacities in various stages, the implementation depth of cognitive elements however is very shallow.

According to Dobbin et al. (2007), dominant actors justify and rationalize dominant ideas with eloquent theoretical justification and consequently provide tools that influence how policymakers conceptualize their problems and suggest potential solutions. In this respect, the implementation of ESFS not only is a justified and rationalized dominant idea finding practice throughout Europe, but it also is an easily adaptable and transferrable model for an aspiring EU nation state like Albania. Hence, its implementation in Albania is easily facilitated. However, in doing so, it appears that ESFS applies mainly at a theoretical level because it fails to enculturate at a deeper cognitive level. This lack of a deeper infiltration level may be explained by either the conditionality and policy leadership theories or hegemonic ideas or both. Conditionality and policy leadership theories link policymaking to incentives whereas hegemonic ideas—the control of social life through the cultural means (Femia, 1983)—link policymaking to a shift of cultural ideas (Dobbin et al., 2007). Data suggest the admission to the EU may be a condition for policy changes in the education and training system, whilst no construct offers support for fundamental hegemonic enculturation. The schism between incentives and cultural enculturation may explain why Albania is heavily invested in educational and training system reforms and the lengthy time line of the reformation process. Does this mean that Albanian policy leaders are skillful in maintaining a healthy balance between pleasing the EU requirements for membership and enriching the local culture? Or is it something exceptional uniquely and contextually Albanian?

Implications for Research

This study explored the components of ESFS in the Albanian education reforms by applying Scott's (1995, 2001, 2008, 2014) CIT. The application of CIT in this study focuses on a macro perspective lens and ignores the subtleties that may occur individually at education and training institutions or state governing institutional levels. While the layers of analysis at a macro perspective level do fulfill the study's stated purposes, they seldom take into account institutional subsystems and the actors associated with these subsystems. I purposely elected a macro perspective level of analysis for this study to provide a holistic theoretical overview of the transference of the ESFS in the Albanian education reforms. At a macro perspective level, findings support the implementation process of the regulative elements such as restructuring or new development of institutions aimed to align the Albanian standards to the European standards. Although findings support a close alignment between the Albanian and the European standards, it is not clear precisely what components complement what area.

With regard to the normative pillar, findings support a partial implementation of the normative elements. Values are congruent with the desired outcomes and the theoretical values placed upon existing Albanian institutions stemming from the theoretical assumptions of ESFS. Institutional norms however are neither clear nor understood and much less applied in the educational reforms. This implication reveals that normative elements are purposely ignored due to either a lack of the educational infrastructure or a loose definition of what constitutes transferrable European standards. Either way, it is relevant to take into account the context upon which ESFS is applied in educational reforms for this study.

As it pertains to the cultural-cognitive pillar, findings are mixed and are based on my interpretation when conducting research and the interpretation of policymakers when formulating policy. As a result, the interpretation of the implications for research may not accurately reflect the interpretation of policymakers when policy was initially incepted. Despite this schism, I attempted to highlight some potential research implications stemming from this study. Results show that Albanian education and training system is following a sporadic mimicking process. While education and training

institutions and the state governing institutions are mirroring specific institutional structures such as NAQVET following a Scottish model of governance, HE following a European model, and VET following German-speaking models are not systematically reflecting the skill formation system as a whole. Specifically, German-speaking models of skill formation differ from Western models of skill formation. Hence, there is a dichotomy between an Anglo-Saxon model of governance informing an influencing a German-speaking model of skill formation. Further research can clarify and shed light upon this implication.

Additionally, Albania has been undergoing through a series of educational changes for the past two decades, and all the changes are geared toward the European standards. Yet, the results are contestable about the extent it achieved its goals and objectives. In this respect, the timeline under which the country undergoes educational changes should provide an understanding of the typical European cultural alienation in Albania. If the European enculturation were to infiltrate the Albanian educational system, then it is reasonable to assume that effects stemming from the European reforms will generate similar effects in the Albanian labor market similar to those found in the European labor market. However, results offer no support on this assumption. Hence, further research would examine the European alienation process of education in Albanian education reforms to help understand the implication between the mimicking processes that Albania is currently employing, the extent of mimicking elements applied in the Albanian educational culture, and if it is applied the depth of application.

A third implication pertinent to research stemming from this study is the formulation of policy by leadership. Policy coordination requires actors coordinate and model behavior and examples of powerful nations (Dobbin et al., 2007). Specifically, Albania is modeling a European model of education and training system and an Anglo-Saxon model of governance. The modeling is based mainly on the assumption that ESFS is a well-tested model that is easily replicated and transferred in Albania. This implication however is flawed since results offer no support of any experimental evidence prior to the implementation process or the effectiveness of coordinating two theoretically different modeling practices (Anglo-Saxon and German-speaking). Hence, further research can clarify this implication in terms of the policy in itself as fit to Albania, and contextualization of why and how policy

modeling is effectively addressing the local capacities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

According to Cohen and Moffitt (2011), governments identify a problem and offer policy solutions to correct them. The Albanian education and training system has numerous problems as stated elsewhere in this study, and ESFS is perceived as the solution of a successful model that helps not only resolve the problem but also enhance and align the Albanian education and training standards with the European standards. However, the implication here is between selecting to exemplify the European model of skill formation system in Albania as a condition for admission to the EU or indeed offer real substantiated solutions to the local issues by resembling leading revered examples. On one hand, conditional policy theorists suggest that policy changes are timed to coincide with a round of negotiations like the candidacy for the EU (Dobbin et al., 2007), and the inception of ESFS in Albanian educational reforms may suggest that Albania is soon becoming a member state of the EU. On the other hand, policymakers may follow the leader, the EU, by emulating what appears they do best (Haverman, 1993) and by ritualistically transferring policies (Bennett, 1991). If the objective is to emulate best practices and ritually transfer policy, then it may be possible that Albania signed on to fully embed ESFS in practice through the educational reforms but failed to implement as a result of ritualistic copying which leads states to mimic the success of other countries such as EU member states without fully understanding the roots for success (Bennett, 1991). Either way, this implication would explain the long and arduous journey of ESFS in the Albanian educational reforms.

Policymakers are rarely the ultimate problem solvers but rather the problem falls on the people and organizations that face and seek to resolve the problem (Cohen & Moffitt, 2011). Specifically, organizations depend on institutions to resolve problems and institutions depend on the resources afforded to the policymakers (Cohen & Moffitt, 2011). Results largely indicate that governing institutions are the sole driving actors of incorporating the components of ESFS into the Albanian educational and training system. When policies are formulated by central governing institutions, they tend to centralize decision-making, restrain local autonomy,

identified as unidimensional, and usually are distributed in a “top-down” direction (Cohen & Moffitt, 2011). Centralized decision-making may not be problematic for the sake of making decision per se, but it may turn into a challenging issue when it is ready for implementation.

Centralization of the decision-making emphasizes compliance (Cohen & Moffitt, 2011), and the results maintain that the implementation of ESFS is centrally implemented at the structural and institutional level. Consequently, coercive compliance of education and training institutions without the required infrastructure in education or industry highlights the issues that stem between the governing policymaking institutions and the practicing institutions responsible for carrying out the policy. This implication suggests that (a) institutional arrangements in Albania are conceived congruently with the European standards in mind since institutional structures deliver policies unilaterally, (b) the implementation of the European skill formation in the Albanian educational and training reforms is flawed since it ignores the practitioners, (c) the implementation of ESFS in the Albanian education and training reform is yet to be completed since normative elements such as goals and objectives and cultural-cognitive elements such as enculturation are not supported by the results, and, probably the most desired outcome, (d) more infrastructural support is in works for education and training institutions by the state governing institutions. Regardless of the position, each implication warrants further research.

The third implication stemming from this study is the relationship triangle between the governing state institutions, education and training institutions, and the local labor market. Albania is geared toward a LME, and so is the labor market. The findings of this study explored that governing state institution follow an Anglo-Saxon governing mode, and an Anglo-Saxon labor market requires skills that are general in nature (Streeck, 2012). Additionally, the results suggest that the education and training institutions follow a mix of Anglo-Saxon and German-speaking countries’ model of skill formation system. Such systems would require a combination of general and specific skills. According to Streeck (2012), the general skills are broad enough to be portable and high enough to associate with the academic professional skills whereas the specific skills are narrowly specialized that makes them non-portable and are usually associated with nonacademic occupations. Lastly, the results of this study inform that the labor market is in

dire need of specific skills, and learners who possess specific skills are situated more strongly in the labor market than those who possess general skills (Streeck, 2012). Since the local labor market in Albania demands more specific skills, the implications are threefold, and they are explained through the following text.

One, either there is a dichotomy between what the labor market requires and what education and training institutions are offering or the emphasis of specific skills in education and training institutions is not broad enough to support a qualified infrastructure of learners equipped with skills that the labor market demands. Either way, it is an issue, and it requires further examination. Two, there is either a dichotomy between the emphasis and the resources of state governing institutions and the emphasis and the resources of education and training institutions or a governance struggle between satisfying a LME versus a CME. This implication is not surprising since the state institutions are geared toward a LME demanding and generating agendas that are congruent with the governing mode. This would also raise further questions whether policies developed by the state institutions intend to fully supply the labor market or further enhance a political agenda. Siding with the intent, it requires clarification. Third, there is a distinct separation between the skills that fit a political agenda governed by a LME system and the skills currently demanded by the local labor market. If the former takes prominence, how is then the labor market sustained? If the latter takes priority, how is then the governance sustained? In this mesele, the role of education and training institutions is undefined. It is possible that education and training institutions will serve as a regulatory conduit between fulfilling an institutional political agenda and fulfilling a local need in the labor market. Regardless of the position, further research could shed light and specify the role each player performs in this affair.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND DECISION-MAKING

The ESFS is an emerging process, and just like other typical policy processes, it is expected to produce its results in the long term. Despite being an evolving process, first lens of examination shows that Albania is heading toward a brighter and more competitive future for the local labor market and

potentially for the European labor market. The chasm between local needs and in vogue degrees such as economics, law, and journalism is abridging and the education and training system appears more responsive to the local needs. As you would expect with the implementation of large national-scale policies, full effects of the impact will be more vibrant in the future than currently presented, although initial evidence directs to a few indicators in the short term. The following short-term recommendations are intended to amplify and ensure the long-term progress as well as provide a comprehensive understanding of ESFS from its impetus to transferability to a national context in Albania and the impact it carries in the Albanian labor market. The findings have informed my judgment in designing carefully a number of short-term interventions implicating theoretical understanding of ESFS, driving confirmatory research in theory application, and practical propositions to employ presently. These recommendations are presented in the next few paragraphs.

First, findings suggest that theoretical implication of ESFS is structurally bound to align and function in similar ways with the European structures. Theoretically, similar structures and similar processes should yield similar results. Findings however, despite noticeable progress, dispute the competitiveness of the Albanian educational standards in generating, attracting, and retaining a supply of qualified personnel capable of acquiring employment in the European labor market. The incongruence between similar structures and similar processes engendering different results requires further theorization diffusion in terms of understanding why similar theoretical models help produce different results. And if different results are produced, to what extent do they align with the intended results initially intended when the theoretical model was incepted? Thus, a recommendation for policymakers would be discerning institutional structures and the neoliberal information processes. Specifically, while organizational structures are congruent with European structures, information processes require a restructuring of work procedures to lessen the bureaucratic barriers inherited almost thirty years ago.

Second, as it pertains to the normative elements of CIT, the values associated with the intended aims and objectives are largely understood, and the norms or the specifications on how to reach those aims and objectives are grossly ignored. In this regard, the theoretical diffusion of the normative

elements helps understand if values are a priori in relation to the norms associated with the employment of the European skill formation in Albanian educational reforms. Better yet, whether the theoretical understanding of CIT applies differently in the Albanian context. This requires further theoretical analysis from three perspectives: (1) if application of values can sustain without the norms that complement the normative elements, (2) if norms are better delegated to the participating actors such as education and training institutions depending on the capacities they possess to employ these values, and (3) how successful is instillment of values when norms are either inexistent or largely misunderstood about what constitutes a value. Thus, policymakers may consider compartmentalizing certain aspects of ESFS to employ with more agility and sustain effectively. This requires a three-phase process, commencing with inception in phase one, determination of resources and the intended objectives in phase two, and impact assessment in phase three.

Third, with regard to the cultural-cognitive elements of CIT, findings contradict what an Albanian vision for the EU is and Albania's cultural and cognitive undertaking toward Europe. Specifically, Albania is currently mimicking the EU and alienating structures and processes, and in the process of doing so, it should alienate a European culture. The results however do not reveal that replication of the European structures and processes are helping alienation of the European culture as well. In this respect, theoretical understanding is warranted about the relationship between engagement and alienation. Under CIT, engagement will inevitably lead to a certain extent of alienation. Under this assumption, either CIT fails to bind universally or a theoretical explanation may address the incongruence in the Albanian context. If the latter is the case, then a theorized argument helps either discern how CIT applies in special ways in the Albanian context or address, accept, and argue that schism between enculturation and engagement can be maintained separately. In light of the cultural chasm between Europe and Albania, it is wise to take into consideration the cultural settings under which ESFS is predicated and either adjust the implementation process under an Albanian context or commence a cultural campaign of ways of doing things. The latter would prove more difficult, thus the former remains more feasible.

Fourth, the interpretation of constructs and the results of this study may help explore the subjectiveness of defining what ESFS is to Albania and how

it applies in an Albanian context. These constructs may contribute and call for further conversations about sociological assumptions pertinent to the influence of the European education and training standards in the Albanian education and training reforms. Additionally, it may help theorize on a conceptual understanding of what defining of what is conceptually applicable and contextually unique particularly to Albania.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Fifth, this exploratory case study of the components of ESFS in the Albanian education and training reforms is the first to focus on exploring the ESFS effects in Albania. As such, it opens new possibilities for further exploration of each of the reported constructs or future case studies focusing narrowly on distinct designs that expand findings of this study. Specifically, governing institutions may consider using an assessment approach to each aspect of ESFS and conglomerate the findings into a single conceptual presentation of work impact. This approach is highly encouraged as it allows the opportunity to adjust accordingly for the duration of the implementation process.

Sixth, future research can help select a different set of participants and data sources, perhaps practitioners who are currently involved in carrying out policies, and ask same questions to triangulate rhetoric formulation of ESFS with the field feasibility of the intended goals. Particularly useful would be teachers and educators who employ these policies in their daily practice. This will help shed light on the intended goals of the policy and the extent policy formulation has achieved its intended goals. It will fully respond to the values and norms elements found in the normative pillar of CIT.

Seventh, this study has focused on the macro perspective layer of CIT analysis to explore the components of ESFS in the Albanian education reforms. Other research can address mid- and narrow levels of CIT analysis that would help shed light specifically on the individual institutions implicated by ESFS and more specifically address the role and routines they play in the deployment of ESFS to practice. This research orientation would help identify the role each governing state institution plays relative to the development of the Albanian reforms. Additionally, it will help position each state governing institutions into the social structure and the routines they play in maintaining the culture they are expected to uphold.

Eighth, this study is intended to set a theoretical inquiry precedent and a referent pillar for future research on ESFS in Albania. Specifically, the results may help incept research that helps inform a more comprehensive grounded theory relative to understanding of the ESFS in Albania. Additionally, the findings may help incept research for future empirical exploration of ESFS in Albania. Specifically, the results can help inform the development of empirical instruments that measure the extent and the depth of the ESFS in the Albanian context. Such instruments would help determine and define in specificity each categorizing concept, and use throughout different disciplines such as education, workforce development, teacher training, and other fields requiring measurement of educational and training preparation. Although intended for Albania and its European education developments in Albania, instruments may be potentially administered in countries that characterize similar traits to Albania and undertake similar Europeanization processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Ninth, findings suggest that Albania has made considerable progress in aligning structural and theoretical levels but it lacks the vision of translating theory to practical outcomes for use by stakeholders. Policymakers may consider designing a pendulum of converting theoretical understanding to structural changes to practical practices to outcomes meeting initial theoretical goals and objectives. This design requires the collaboration and the modification of a number of governing institutions to align individually with each one's intended mission on how it applies for their work. Specifically, it requires an alignment of understanding of the purpose of a policy formulation with the structure and work processes to safeguard even operations.

Tenth, the results indicate that either infrastructure to carry out policies is missing altogether or it inadequately meets the necessary needs to carry out the reforms successfully. Policymakers may consider developing financial and infrastructural programs parallel to each European development in Albania to support the implementation process from the inception stage to practical use stage. Of course, developing programs of this size would be unsustainable for such a serious undertaking. However, a more probable solution that would help satisfy requirements of the European reforms and the

successful implementation would be an implementation process separated in small sections being supported by a program that focuses solely on that particular aspect. This would ultimately lead to various programs supporting various aspects of ESFS in the education and training system.

Eleventh, findings suggest that the education and training institutions do not meet the current local labor needs. The social stigma of attending a particular field such as law, journalism, or economics has fostered a culture that produces a surfeit of graduates unable to serve to the local labor market needs. Country's physical infrastructure will not rebuild by journalists, economics, or law graduates, but rather by qualified learners who are capable and equipped with the necessary skills to perform certain employment duties and responsibilities. As a result, it would be wise for policymakers to initiate a cultural change process that helps educate citizenry about the importance of each profession and how each profession serves societal needs. This area probably requires most persistence from policymakers knowing that Albanian cultural roots spread in-depth and wide in maintaining a strong and authentic culture that is uniquely Albanian. This takes efforts, courage, and more importantly, education that introduces the benefits of change.

Twelfth, the conclusion of this study reveals that decision-making is generally unilateral and unidimensional in a top-down direction. Top-down decision-making is warranted and necessary when the stakeholders have the capacities and the skills to carry out policies in the way they were intended in the inception stage. Findings however reveal that capacities that stakeholders possess are not only sufficient to sustain policy changes but also unsubstantial to improve to meet ends means. In this regard it is ineffective to embody policies that are unable to carryforward. Policymakers may consider cultivating and incorporating a collaborative network of various stakeholders that help generate an inventory stock of the current capacities afforded and the extent that policymaking is carried out under the present circumstances.

Thirteenth, the results suggest that external actors are playing major roles in Albania's reformation process. Specifically, numerous interests are playing different roles at varying capacities such an extensive interest by the German-speaking countries in VET and an extended interest of the Anglo-Saxon model in HE. Both fields involve actors who not only have a keen interest in the HE and VET fields in Albania but also have significant experience in developing effective frameworks that helps enhance the roles each field plays

in society. As a result, policymakers may want to consider deepening and strengthening the engagement in a way that helps them take what external actors know best. This can be achieved in two specific ways: one, assist designing an agenda that incorporates the needs of the labor market and the intent on how to best meet these needs, and two, aid and design the alignment of foreign agendas congruent to an agenda that aims to serve to the local labor market needs. It is the researcher's belief that this sort of collaboration would create mutually beneficial opportunities and serve as catalyst for change in future policy implementations.

A FINAL SAY

Albania has made remarkable progress thus far in reconfiguring its educational landscape and is heading very much to a quality education and training system. The ESFS is still an emerging concept for Albania. Despite its undefined definition, Albania has made considerable improvements toward integrating its education and training system with the ESFS. For the past quarter century, Albania has experienced revolutionary changes from the way it governs itself to major shifts of economic forces to the way it educates and equips its labor workforce. It is without a doubt that Albania is heading toward the right direction for admission toward the EU and developing universities and education and training centers that will help generate an effective workforce capable of meeting not only the demands of the local labor market but also contribute to the demands of the European labor market.

Albania has reached a tipping point, and it is currently standing on precarious grounds. It has a choice to integrate an agenda that will help respond to its local needs and contribute to the larger European needs or continue with the status quo and the disconnection of the reality and the rhetoric that has been standing upon since the early 1990s. I am cautiously optimistic that Albania will elect participating and incorporating an agenda that will help its citizens evolve prepared with the necessary skills into the European community. The time has come for Albania to become a modern society on par with its European peers and help contribute its fair share in developing a knowledge-driven and skillfully equipped educated society capable of sustaining a colorful future for the generations to come. Until then,

there is still much work remaining.

NOTES

1. 1. How have the components of ESFS informed policymakers in addressing Albanian national skill formation system reforms? 2. How has the understanding of these components informed Albanian national skill formation system policies? 3. To what extent have the new policies aligned the Albanian educational standards with the European and international standards?

2. Neighboring countries bordering Albania in the Western Balkans are seeking to become participating members of the EU.

3. Shaping education policy requires more than borrowing best practices. Field practitioners and policymakers will find this study useful in understanding the theoretical concepts and the necessary resources needed for the successful implementation of national reforms.

4. Implementing national reforms requires a vast amount of resources, and the appropriate designing of programs ensures resources are utilized wisely and compartmentalized to effectively support designed parts of reforms.

5. Local stakeholders such as medium- and large-size business and foreign actors such as WB, UN, USAID, and so on have provided sizable support in various material or monetary capacities.

6. While it may be argued that several projects are undertaken in Albania and several pilot projects are conducted, significant relevance translating projects and learning into a more effective force for the local labor market is largely absent or unknown at best.

7. These capacities lie under the CIT framework. They are regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive aspects of CIT.

8. Albania's prolonging to the EU membership has elevated the hopes of Albanians for the EU journey.

9. Changing culture requires times and possibly the passing of a generation.

10. Unlike neighboring countries which have experienced various degrees of difficulties but never changing course of progress, Albania has experienced, expressed in a time line since early 1990s, regress, status quo, progress, and experimentation in varying measures.

11. From the way people live by increasing their standard of living to the way they express themselves by infusing and following Western methods.

12. Almost three decades.

13. I consider Albania's journey unpleasant for its lagging capacities to modernize its current existing institutions with the fall of Hoxha's regime. Albania had a special opportunity to build upon the infrastructure inherited by the Hoxha's regime. Instead, it selected to dilapidate and rebuild with a free market. The instability of the country, including the civil war in 1997 and Kosovo's refugee crises in 2001 significantly slowed growth and progress.

14. According to INSTAT (2016a), more than 65 percent of Albania's population participated in VET programs.

15. Engagement occurred mostly on trade with the export of Albanian products to European markets.

16. Despite almost three decades after Hoxha's regime change, Albanians still consider the country under transition.

17. Unable to develop a vision for the future, Albania inevitably relied heavily on European

education and training reforms as the only means to join the EU community and reshape the education and training landscape for the country.

18. The UN Refugee Agency has estimated about 25 percent of Kosovo's population to immigrate and find shelter in Albania during the Kosovo war crisis.

19. Assisting the country to increase wages, living conditions, and assist with the EU integration process.

20. Archival databases of news and media channels have revealed hypothesis for EU establishing unilateral relationships with Albania to sustain its labor needs and experiment theoretical learning model to write academic papers.

21. Accessibility increases content knowledge, which expands opportunities in the European labor market.

22. Foreign projects tend to focus on certain industry sectors such as tourism, culinary arts, and agriculture for VET and teacher professional development and curriculum development for HE.

23. Perceived image of HE and VET has been the main driver of career choices pursuing economics, journalism, and/or law degrees for many students.

24. Education Act of 2015 is the latest legal statute

25. This is particularly relevant knowing Albania's previous history in pursuing membership with the EU community.

About the Author

Indrit Vuçaj is currently a research fellow scholar in the College of Education at Oklahoma State University conducting research in institutional approaches to international education reforms. He is known for his implementation expertise and sociocultural issues of national education reforms in Albania and the Balkans region, and he frequently offers education reformation consultancy to a variety of international stakeholders. Dr. Vuçaj serves on the board of numerous international peer-reviewed educational and methodological journals, while maintaining an active research agenda with diverse writing projects, student mentorship, and fieldwork experiences in education landscape in the United States and overseas.