

Analysis: The secret changes in the Draft Law for Higher Education in Kosovo undermine academic integrity

The Organisation for Increasing the Quality of Education, ORCA, wishes to bring to your attention a most concerning development with the legislation on higher education in Kosovo.

Established in 2016, ORCA conducted a tailored research on the academic titles (ranks) of 71 members of the managing staff of the University of Prishtina. The report published on February 15 2017 [\[link\]](#) found the situation wanting, where about half of the analysed professors were unable to justify the academic ranks they hold in compliance with the existing regulation.

While the current situation in the Kosovo education system is plagued by an array of poignant issues, the need for changes in the existing legislation has been continuously encouraged by civil society actors, experts, members of parliament and professors alike.

This way, the “Draft Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Kosova” introduced by the Kosovo Parliament in the recent years, and object of several revisions, should be welcomed in principle and receive all available support and positive criticism from the relevant actors.

While a previous draft [\[link\]](#) has been discussed with institutions and interested public, a specific article that concerns academic promotions has been recently included in the last version of the bill [\[link\]](#) without any consultations with the civil society.

ORCA sees this introduction clearly problematic as it paves the way for increasingly lenient and incoherent promotion of academic staff in Kosovo universities, thus further jeopardising academic meritocracy and overall higher education performance.

Article 27 stipulates the following criteria on scientific publications for the academic ranks of Regular professor, Associate professor and Assistant professor:

“Publication at international level means scientific article published in an international journal indexed in the Web of Science, in Scopus, or scientific platforms known at the international level, with “impact factor” >0, or in journals dealing with economic, social and cultural themes relevant to Kosovo that in view of experts of relevant field are considered to be of comparable quality. The list of these journals should be prepared from academic units and must be approved by the Senate of the higher education institution. This list could be updated upon the initiative by the academic units.”

There are several issues with this clause:

1. While the existing legislation stipulates that professors should have a specific number of scientific papers according to their rank, published [only] in international scientific journals, the new bill envisions also publication in non-scientific journals: *“in journals dealing with economic, social and cultural themes relevant to Kosovo”*.
 - a. Such change is in clear contrast with international and local best practices of academic promotion, and allows for professors to be promoted based on publications which, to say the least, do not involve the necessary academic editing and peer review (!)
 - b. These alternative publications (bulletins, proceedings, books etc.) as opposed to scientific journals, are often used by Kosovar professors to publish works which were refused or that would not make it to be published in international scientific journals.

2. This introduction also envisions some blurry safety mechanisms for these alternative publications, which “*in view of experts of relevant field are considered to be of comparable quality*”, and that a “*list of these journals should be prepared from academic*” bodies.
 - a. Considering the poor state of academia in Kosovo and the sometimes illegal decision making in academic promotion – as we have evidenced in our research – these outstanding introductions of a very relative nature, practically legalise further deterioration in scientific discipline and tolerance towards academic mediocrity.
3. This same piece of legislation foresees that eligible scientific international journals where Kosovar professors ought to publish their papers to qualify for promotion, should be “*indexed in the Web of Science, in Scopus, or scientific platforms known at the international level*”.
 - a. It is true that apart from the two specifically mentioned indexes there are also other decent international indices of scientific journals as per specific fields. However, it remains unclear which other scientific platforms would be deemed appropriate, being that the Senate of the University of Prishtina, for instance, considers also Google Scholar to be an official scientific indexing platform, which definitively is not the case.
4. The introduction of a condition that international scientific journals should have an impact factor (an indicator that measures the power of a journal through the number of its citations) is a positive one; however it simply sanctions an “*impact factor >0*”.
 - a. This definition is incomplete, because an impact factor higher than zero, at least mathematically and thus also legally, can be any irrelevant number, e.g. 0.01. Also, as we have evidenced in our research, many Kosovar professors have published in dubious (potential predatory) journals which claim unrealistic impact factors while their articles are almost never cited elsewhere.

ORCA considers that while some of these specific introductions may produce very little progress if any at all, other included criteria such as the ‘alternative publications’ for scientific papers, may result in dreadful consequences for the country’s academia.

We consider that these changes are not only harmful to the aimed improvement of the higher education quality in Kosovo, but they also represent a clear setback for academic integrity and meritocracy. Academic promotion is the *Achilles Heel* of Kosovo’s higher education system when it comes to quality of teaching and the overall scientific performance in the country.

For years, networks of favours and political influence in public universities have been active in hiring and appointing unsuitable individuals to professorships through unsuitable academic promotion, whereas persons with excellent academic achievements have been systematically obstructed.

It is ORCA-s belief that these criteria apparently introduced in 2015, are a direct result of the increased public scrutiny on academic promotions during the recent years.

Thereby, as we are urgently sharing our concern with other involved members of the civil society, professors, MPs and key institutions, we wish to also inform you on this furtive change before it is too late and the draft is transformed into applicable law. To our knowledge there is no scheduled date for voting the bill in the assembly, but the latter is currently being processed in parliament’s chambers.

We thank you for considering this communication and we also want to assure you that ORCA remains keen to cooperate with both Kosovo public bodies and international institutions in any way that would benefit the country’s education system.