

---

# Higher Education as a Catalyst to Stimulate Citizen Participation in the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia



This project is financed by  
the European Union



REACH-OR  
research in action



This edition of policy papers is developed to assist the civil society and citizens, in general, engage in an informed debate and have access to expert knowledge, views and opinions on topics of importance for EU integrations. Areas in which the Republic of North Macedonia will lead its EU accession negotiations are both complex and diverse, while reforms that need to be implemented will open many dilemmas that necessitate an expert debate. For more contents produced under the project “CSO Dialogue – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integrations”, visit the website: **[www.dijalogkoneu.mk](http://www.dijalogkoneu.mk)**

- Author: Artan Limani, PhD
- This edition is available only in electronic format

Democracy around the world has seen a dramatic downshift in recent years. In their Democracy Under Siege report,[1] the Freedom House reports that “democracy’s defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favor of tyranny.” The number of free countries declined from 89 in 2005 to 82 in 2020. Similarly, the number of not free countries increased from 45 in 2005 to 54 in 2020. Particularly worrying is that India and the United States saw a decline in democratic liberties and standards, predominantly due to the happenings in the US Capitol in Washington DC, as well as the dramatic decline in civil liberties in India through elevated pressure on human rights civic organizations, coercion on journalists and academics, and state meddling in the judiciary.

North Macedonia is not an exception. The country remains partly free[2] within the Freedom House score for 2021, scoring only three points in the Global Freedom Status. Civil liberties are awarded only 39 points out of 60 in the scoreboard. This slow move forward is concerning; however, what is more concerning is that according to the organization, corruption in universities remains largely widespread, even though academic freedom maintains a level of acceptance across the board. In other words, democracy in the country is fragile and difficult to maintain a steady course to achieve a widespread systemic rule of law, social, gender, ethnic, and religious equity, quality education for all, equal rights for all minority and under-represented groups, quality and access to universal health care, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, independent journalism, and a government free from oligarchic influence. A small country like North Macedonia could easily achieve progress; however, it needs to build human capacity, especially among its younger citizens. Millennials and generation Z are slowly gaining momentum in the country’s demographic landscape and as such, they are seen as the generation to make the necessary shift towards a functional democracy.

A big part of generation Z are now students in North Macedonia. The 2020/2021 cohort registered 50.881 students in the whole higher education system, though in the first year of studies, 12.365 applied for registration.[3] Though this number is 1.7% smaller than the previous cohort, 50.881 students is quite an impressive number of youngsters pursuing higher education. Without going back to previous academic years since the country’s independence, logically, the country could achieve a sustainable democracy if 50.000 of its citizens get equipped with civic and democratic competencies for 10 years consecutively. Mathematically, this would mean that, if conducted properly, in ten years, 500.000 citizens of North Macedonia could push civic and democratic processes of the country forward and maintain a more functional democracy for the country and its institutions. What is more, democracy and civilization go hand in hand and as such, they are solely dependent on education. Higher education must provide opportunities for students to grow and develop into global citizens who will possess robust knowledge about scientific, social, political, academic, and institutional processes.

A recent study conducted by the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje[4] revealed that North Macedonia and the whole Balkan region remain susceptible to populism and populist discourse, which almost always results with authoritarianism and the weakening of democracy. One of the reasons for this susceptibility is that citizens embrace conspiracy theories as true, while populist politicians misuse this weakness and gain politically through engaging in inflammatory rhetoric and rhetoric of fear.

---

[1] Freedom House. Freedom in the World 2021. Democracy Under Siege. Available at [freedomhouse.org](https://freedomhouse.org). Accessed on 15.11.2021.

[2] Freedom House. Freedom in the World 2021. North Macedonia. Available at [freedomhouse.org](https://freedomhouse.org). Accessed on 15.11.2021.

[3] Во земјава има 50.881 студент, од кои повеќе од 8.000 студираат медицина. Available at [Fakulteti.mk](https://fakulteti.mk). Accessed on 16.11.2021.

[4] Man of the People: Public Opinion Analysis of Citizen’s Political Demands. Public opinion analysis No.33/2021. Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje. Available at [idscs.org.mk](https://idscs.org.mk). Accessed on December 3, 2021.

North Macedonia and its citizens still can't fully recuperate from the April 27, 2016 events, when a group of mobsters stormed the parliament and severely injured democratically elected MP's. This has left a permanent dark mark on the already fragile democracy in the country. It is utterly concerning that the study[5] revealed a public opinion which is worrisome, but at the same time speaks about the legacy that a dysfunctional K-12 mandatory educational system has left to its citizens. The ramifications of this dysfunction are further perpetuated in the higher education system in the country, which has been unable to fill in the knowledge and skills gap among students. The study[6] revealed that there is a very low level of trust in democratic institutions in the country, from 2.8% in the judiciary to 4.4% trust in the president of the country, on a 10-point scale. Similarly, the government and the parliament are not trusted by the citizens as well. Both of these institutions received a 3.5 grade out of 10, which is as much concerning as for the two previous institutions. What makes the public realm even more worrisome is the results from the study which reveal a high acceptance and belief in conspiracy theories among citizens in the country. Specifically, the study revealed that as much as 53% of surveyed citizens partially agree that the world is run by a handful of powerful families while 8% are in full agreement with this statement. What is more, large numbers of surveyed people partially/fully agree that the pandemic was created in a lab (20%/44%); the climate is controlled by satellites and radars (14%/32%); the Ministry of Health inflates numbers of dead people from COVID-19 as they receive money from it (15%/30%); the virus is sprayed using airplanes (15%/31%); climate change is a hoax (9%/20%); and large media outlets mostly spread lies (23%/34%).

### **We can and must do better than this**

Higher education can and should help the society in the Republic of North Macedonia overcome this intellectual crisis. It can do so by equipping its students with the skills and values needed to achieve a functional democracy for all, based on a shared trust and inclusion. Moreover, universities must re-align their missions in order to contribute to the development of a new knowledge-based generation who will be equipped with civic, social, and democratic values. This generation will not only need and be able to foresee the future, but will also need to create it and make difficult decisions both in certain and uncertain times. Countries which have invested their human and material resources to developing higher education, have done so by systematically and incrementally improving the ecosystem through a national and widely accepted strategy. In North Macedonia, higher education should be treated as a national emergency in order to re-align the whole human and material potential and create a new ecosystem based on collaboration, research, and with full access to scientific and scholarly discoveries.

Universities in the developed world have already made a shift towards embracing a new model of educating students. Patrick Blessinger, in his article, asserts that in an interconnected global knowledge society, it is of utmost importance that universities adopt a "humanistic vision for higher education." [7] In other words, as the world is challenged by global threats of climate change, authoritarianism, decline in human rights, corruption, and nuclear proliferation, a higher education with a **humanistic vision** would allow for improving relations among people and countries, assure **sustainable development**, and allow for **lifelong learning** for all. Blessinger presents three major paradigm shifts that have taken place in universities across the developed world. "Lifelong learning," besides being considered a human right, it has also become an important part of life among people, which could be achieved through a diversification of higher education institution types and through an enlargement of study programs offerings.

---

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

[7] Patrick Blessinger. A higher ideal for higher education. HERDSA CONNECT, Volume 40, Number 3, Spring 2018. Available at [herdsa.org.au](https://herdsa.org.au). Accessed on 01.12.2021

The second paradigm shift, according to Blessinger, is “democratization of knowledge.” Access to quality higher education institutions and programs which allow for access to a plethora of education resources, including comprehensive library resources, make up for the concept of democratization of knowledge to sustain its shift. Finally, the third shift is the “development of a global knowledge society,” which Blessinger closely relates to lifelong education and the availability to acquire it. Universities must play a core role in generating authentic knowledge, through scientific pursuit, to contribute to the global knowledge society and comparatively challenge the work of UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Economic Forum, The World Bank, and OECD.

The humanistic or interdisciplinary model and approach to higher education was originally developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, a German philosopher, who was appointed by the Prussian king to implement administrative, social, and economic reforms. A university reform was part of the package and as such the king appointed Humboldt as the head of education in the Prussian Ministry of the Inner during 1809/10 to implement it. The comprehensive reform solution Humboldt created in higher education was based on research, education through science, freedom to teach and learn, and the unity of science. [8] In other words, the Humboldtian model envisioned that the academia can pursue knowledge independently through a separation of powers, such as those seeking power and those seeking knowledge. Moreover, under the model, university professors are considered civil servants (a high rank within the German administrative system which guarantees tenure to the professoriate) in order to shield them from outside interests.[9] Additionally, within the Humboldtian model, the university is considered a catalyst for social transformation whose pursuit for truth through scientific endeavors would result with the overall well-being of the state.[10] As far as academic freedom goes, the Humboldtian model envisions it as a safeguard of the academic in order to independently seek and find the truth, albeit it may compromise the already established societal conventions. Similarly, freedom to teach and learn and the demand for solitude and freedom, guarantee the scholar to create new knowledge through research and warrants her/him social relevance to the conducted research and teaching. In other words, the model foresees a strong bond between teaching and research and establishes that teaching is more impactful and creative if the professor conducts research and centers the same on the process itself. Finally, the central element established by Humboldt in the whole model is the relationship between professors and students. Specifically, he asserts that students should join professors in their quest to discovery and the creation of truth through specific mentorship schemes. [11]

The original Humboldtian model, though exceptionally comprehensive and utilitarian, has not seen much of an implementation as a whole, including in Germany and in the European continent in general. Nevertheless, the United States higher education system has apparently seen a lot of potential in the Humboldtian model and has adopted much of it in its own unique way, calling it a Liberal Arts Education. Though the concept is older than Humboldt and dates back in ancient Greece, all who adopted and implemented the model were interested in the creation of the whole person in order for them to be actively involved in civic life. Humboldt believed that regardless of the occupation a person may pursue, they must be informed citizens able to think and possess a strong character. In the foundation of the American Liberal Arts Education is to harness the ability to think critically, creatively, and innovatively in a global and diverse society. In sum, the ultimate goal of all of the three systems and models mentioned, all dating back to ancient Greece and perpetuated by Humboldt, is to create a knowledge-based society with each citizen possessing depth and breadth of knowledge acquired through a research-based scholastic endeavor.

---

[8] Reiners, A. (2014). Humboldt versus Neoliberalism. University Academics' Perception of Higher Education Changes in Germany and England. Department of Education. Stockholm University. Master Thesis. Available at [diva-portal.org](http://diva-portal.org). Accessed on 28.11.2021

[9] Ibid

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid

Harvard university just recently restructured its curricula to add General Education requirements towards graduation. Namely, in order to graduate, students in the class of 2020 and beyond must choose and complete courses from four General Education categories such as Aesthetics & Culture, Ethics & Civics, Histories, Societies, Individuals, and Science and Technology in Society.[12] Specifically, students pursuing a Computer Science degree will need to at least take four General Education courses from the above-mentioned topics. To add to the explanation, the University of Iowa, a large public research university in the United States, has an even more comprehensive General Education program. Namely, to be able to graduate with a degree in Applied Physics[13] from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, students will need to complete a number of credit hours (as described in their course catalog) from the following disciplines: Communication and Literacy, Sustainability, Natural, Quantitative, and Social Sciences, Culture, Society, and the Arts.[14] Within Communication and Literacy, students must choose a course in Diversity and Inclusion, Rhetoric, Interpretation of Literature, and World Languages. Similarly, from the group of Natural, Quantitative, and Social Sciences courses, students must choose Natural Sciences, Quantitative or Formal Reasoning, and Social Sciences. Moreover, from the Culture, Society, and the Arts group of classes, students must attend classes in Historical Perspectives, Literary, Visual and Performing Arts, International and Global Issues, and Values and Culture. Finally, students must also attend classes in World Languages which they can choose from a robust line of classes such as Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, and many more. Understandably, General Education classes in Sustainability will be offered in the program for students starting as of summer semester of 2022.

Comparatively, the Applied Physics program at the Institute of Physics, at St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, is geared towards equipping students solely with skills in the field of Astrophysics and Astronomy, while providing them with no interdisciplinary learning opportunities, whatsoever. What is more, elective classes in all 8 semesters are not interdisciplinary, but rather ones that focus on the fields or within the range of the science of Physics.[15]

### **Solutions for the Higher Education system in North Macedonia**

The case with the curriculum in Applied Physics at the Institute of Physics in Skopje is not the only one. Other programs across the range of different schools are tailored along the same pattern. One other example is the Faculty of Fine Arts at St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. In their first cycle of studies they offer a Graphic Art program, which is tailored completely along the same model as the Applied Physics program. To be eligible to graduate, students need to attend and successfully complete a range of classes from the field, in all 6 semesters of the BA program.[16] What is slightly different in this program is that the list of elective classes[17] goes beyond the program, nonetheless, it is limited to Pedagogy, Psychology, Macedonian and English language, while other electives, oddly enough, are from the field itself.

To be able to aid the country in its never-ending attempt and quest to establish a functional democracy, higher education institutions must do it beyond their curricula. Curricular interventions are necessary in order to democratize and diversify knowledge through a plethora of interdisciplinary academic experiences, nonetheless, a university experience must enrich students' experiences through informal and non-formal engagements in university and campus life. Curricular and extracurricular activities, as well as immersion of each student in the creation of student life on campus and beyond in the community, is what would provide both depth and breadth of knowledge for each student.

[12] Harvard University. Harvard College. Program in General Education. Requirements. Available at [gened.fas.harvard.edu](https://gened.fas.harvard.edu). Accessed on 02.12.2021

[13] The University of Iowa. College of Arts and Sciences. Bachelor of Science in Applied Physics. Available at [physics.uiowa.edu](https://physics.uiowa.edu). Accessed on 03.12.2021.

[14] The University of Iowa. College of Arts and Sciences. Bachelor of Science in Applied Physics. GE CLAS Core Areas and Requirements. Available at [catalog.registrar.uiowa.edu](https://catalog.registrar.uiowa.edu). Accessed on 03.12.2021

[15] St. Cyril and Methodius University. Institute of Physics. First Cycle of Studies (Bachelor Studies). Applied Physics. Available at [if.pmf.ukim.edu](https://if.pmf.ukim.edu). Accessed on 4.12.2021.

[16] St. Cyril and Methodius University. Faculty of Fine Arts. Graphic Art Study Program. Available at [flu.ukim.edu.mk](https://flu.ukim.edu.mk). Accessed on 5.12.2021.

[17] St. Cyril and Methodius University. Faculty of Fine Arts. Graphic Art Study Program. List of elective courses. Available at [flu.ukim.edu.mk](https://flu.ukim.edu.mk). Accessed on 5.12.2021.

Depth is usually provided through the engagement of the student in closely studying the subject matter from different perspectives and theories of knowledge, while breadth is provided through engagement in interdisciplinary liberal education. At the center of all of this, as the Humboldtian model suggests, special emphasis should be given to research and the ability for professors and students to pursue it, independent of any outside impact. This includes a whole new vision on university reform whereby a whole new research infrastructure needs to be developed, including full access to scientific discoveries and research publications.

Universities in the European Union have already started to change their roles in the regional ecosystems through transforming from traditional knowledge-creation institutions into generators of social and business innovations. In a study conducted by the European University Association,[18] universities such as Aalto University, Finland, Masaryk University, Czech Republic, Sorbonne University, France, tU/e – Eindhoven, University of technology, the Netherlands, tUM – technical University of Munich, Germany, University of Manchester, UK, University of Minho, Portugal, University of Warsaw, Poland, UPC – Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain, provide evidence for making progress towards bridging students' skills gaps in order to prepare them to deal with fundamental challenges and to contribute to their societies, in a context of change and to strive for innovation. All of the above universities had reported that they have started to “integrate interdisciplinary approaches into teaching curricula and methods” (p.24).[19] For example, the study reports that at Sorbonne in Paris, new interdisciplinary curricula have attracted a larger number of students, who at the same time are more motivated to engage in academic work. Moreover, at the Technical University in Munich (TUM) they have intertwined social sciences and humanities with engineering curricula through a project-based approach in a broad range of implementing entrepreneurial and digital skills across the engineering curriculum.[20] Generally, the study found that the above-mentioned universities heavily focused on providing students the skills to manage prevalent social, economic, and technology-related issues at present and in the future. Specifically, select universities, such as Aalto, TU/e, and TUM, prepare students to through engaging in mentored research, engage in innovation to deal with major technological and social rapid change.[21] In sum, entrepreneurial, digital, leadership, and social responsibility skills across curricula at all universities mentioned above, prepare students for dealing with social innovations as well as for being socially responsive and active citizens in shaping the local, regional, and state ecosystems, for more functional micro and macro systems.

The EU trend in shaping new higher education social impact is robust and remarkable. However, it is far behind the original Humboldtian model. Realistically, the original model developed by Humboldt, even though it did not see a full implementation since its conception, it is closely implemented in the Liberal Arts higher education system in the United States. Researchers and supporters of Liberal Arts Education assert that it has a positive impact on individual achievement and the common social good through graduates to local communities and the society at large. Higher education around the world not only should make efforts to prepare students for active participation in the democratic processes, but must also help them become defenders of democracies in the countries they operate in, their regions, and globally.

---

[18] Reichert, S. (2019). European University Association. The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems. Available at [eua.eu](http://eua.eu). Accessed on 7.12.2021.

[19] Ibid

[20] Ibid

[21] Ibid

Though the Liberal Arts higher education model is more systematic and almost adopted widely in the United States, the EU has continuously strived to establish a functional higher education system in order to provide students the agency to lead the industrial revolution in the 21st century, but to also defend democracy and principles based on equity and human rights. In February 2013, a high-level conference was organized in Andorra, under the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The conference, “Competences for a Culture of Democracy and Intercultural Dialogue: A Political Challenge and Values,” intended to stratify approaches in the field of education for the 2014-2015 program and prepare for the following conference of Ministers of Education meeting held that same year in Helsinki. The latter intended to close a 15-year open discussion on reforming education, in all levels, by establishing a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFDC). The framework provided [descriptors of competences](#) adopted to be used as a basis for curriculum development at all levels. In the values group of descriptors, key descriptor 12 asserts that “schools should teach students about democracy and how to act as a democratic citizen.”[22] One of the key conclusions of the Andorra conference explicitly specified the promotion of cultivating students’ competences in democracy into higher education which has since been engraved in the conclusions of the effort. The report further states that “it is in kindergartens and primary schools that the basic notions of competences for democracy and intercultural dialogue should first be instilled - and at secondary and higher level that they should be reinforced and formalized”[23]

Higher education in North Macedonia is caught off-guard with all the happenings in the sectoral realm. According to the programs reviewed for the purpose of this document, it is evident that study programs are exclusively based on the field of study and do not offer an interdisciplinary experience to equip students with the skills needed for defending civic values and for rebuilding a whole new set of democratic ideals. The country remains divided across ethnic lines and there is a sheer appetite for a growing autocratic regime. Women rights are challenged on daily basis; marginalized groups are threatened for their lives; there is a low voter turnout; low number of active civil society organizations; innovation and start-ups are at a low rate; private family-owned agriculture and farming ventures almost non-existent; while the number of politically appointed public administrators is at a record high and growing.

Universities in North Macedonia not only don’t provide students interdisciplinary experiences and democratic competences, but they also fail to prepare students for the jobs of the future. The World Economic Forum (WEF) predicts that 50 percent of all employees will need reskilling by 2025. According to the WEF, among the top 10 skills employees will need in 2025 are analytical thinking and innovation, active learning and learning strategies, complex problem-solving, critical thinking and initiative, leadership and social influence, technology use, monitoring and control, technology design and programing, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility, reasoning, problem-solving and ideation.[24]

### Opportunities for reform

There are two massive moments that the higher education system in North Macedonia must make a great use to shift the paradigm and implement the necessary changes: 1) the pandemic and what we learnt from it and 2) the attainment of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s).[25] The two may overlap at certain points but may also complement one another. Namely, the UN 17 sustainable development goals are to be reached by 2030, while the country needs to play a significant role in making progress. Universities should lead this process; nonetheless, both time and effort in North Macedonia are scarce.

[22] Council of Europe. Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. Descriptors of competences. The key descriptors. Values. 3: Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law. Available at: [rm.coe.int](http://rm.coe.int). Accessed on 05.12.2021

[23] Council of Europe. Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education. Governance and Quality Education. 24th session. Helsinki, Finland, 26-27 April, 2013. Available at [rm.coe.int](http://rm.coe.int). Accessed on 06.12.2021.

[24] World Economic Forum. These are the top 10 job skills of tomorrow – and how long it takes to learn them. Available at [weforum.org](http://weforum.org). Accessed on 30.11.2021.

[25] United Nations. 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Available at [sdgs.un.org](http://sdgs.un.org). Accessed on 06.12.2021



Zhao & Watterston (2021)[1] believe that the pandemic has created an exceptional opportunity for all the changes in education that have been suggested by experts and researchers to finally be implemented. They suggest three major changes after the pandemic, which are very much in line with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, across all levels of education: 1) “curriculum that is developmental, personalized, and evolving; 2) pedagogy that is student-centered, inquiry-based, authentic, and purposeful; 3) delivery of instruction that capitalizes on the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous learning.”

Suggestions by Zhao and Watterston are in line with those that were mentioned previously, in accordance with the Liberal Arts education in the United States, as well as with the massive paradigm shift in higher education reform in the European Union. The example with the University of Iowa implementing sustainability in its General Education curriculum as of summer 2022 echoes their commitment to working towards achieving SDG’s in an institutional as well as on a larger scale. Similarly, there is a higher education reform trend in the EU through which universities have made realignment to their curricula to achieve the SDG’s. Chaleta et al., (2021),[27] conducted a curriculum mapping at the university of Evora in Portugal to assess course units relative to the inclusion of SDG’s. Across 187 course units, data shows that SDG’s such as Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) were most prevalent across curricula, including SDG4 (Quality Education) which was found in every course objective mapped through the study.

North Macedonia must simultaneously work to defend democracy and create new democratic ideals as well as to achieve SDG’s. Civic and democratic education across curricula in higher education will elicit achievement of more than one sustainable development goal. Besides increasing the quality of education (SDG4), which is in direct correlation with any of the three reforms suggested by Zhao and Watterston (2021), it will also cover gender equality (SDG5), reduced inequalities (SDG10), climate action (SDG13), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG16), and generate partnerships for the goals to be attained (SDG17). Besides the obvious, education for democratic citizenship, particularly in the new and fragile democracy of North Macedonia, will aid in the fight of the ever-present corruption in the country, prevent the return of autocracy, provide for a more just and free space for journalists to do their noble job, and keep oligarchs away from gaining control of the government.

North Macedonia’s higher education system has a long way to go to conduct the needed reforms vis-à-vis helping the country attain the SDG’s, both from a systems perspective as well as from an institutional one. Other countries in the European Union have already made progress through including the sustainability agenda across their curricula. Though Evora University in Portugal marks progress towards teaching some of the SDG’s across the curriculum, given the time available to achieve the 17 UN goals, both Evora and other universities across the world must make more serious efforts. Education for democratic citizenship in North Macedonia’s higher education system may seriously improve higher education outcomes through helping the country’s democratic participation, nevertheless, it shall not necessarily help the higher education system in the country play its pivotal role in teaching all SDG’s systematically. This should be conducted through a national initiative agenda where universities in the country will adopt the reforms needed to pursue an overarching SDG higher education agenda.

[27] Chaleta, E., Saraiva, M., Leal, F., Fialho, I., & Borrvalho, A. (2021). Higher education and sustainable development goals (SDG)—Potential contribution of the undergraduate courses of the school of social sciences of the university of évora. *Sustainability* (Basel, Switzerland), 13(4), 1828. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041828>

# Recommendations for reform

## 01

Reforms in the higher education system should start from the most prevalent. Namely, from a systems perspective, the Government and the Ministry of Education, in close cooperation with Civil Society Organizations working in the field, **should amend the current law in order to allow for universities to be able to elect younger members of the academic staff to lead universities in a 2030 vision.** Similarly, this **should allow public universities to accept applications for university rectors from academics outside of the country**, who will be able to present a robust development vision for it to achieve local and global goals and help create a knowledge-based academic community inside each institution. With the current leaders, public universities will not be able to achieve the above-mentioned reforms. Equally important is the fact that **new university leaders, must enact a research-based agenda, which will help turn universities from predominantly teaching public higher institutions to research ones.** This requires immense investment both from a human potential perspective as well as from a support research infrastructure one. **Apart from the need for more funding from the system, university leaders must generate and lead a robust fundraising and a grant-winning agenda.** This could be achieved by leaders who have the *know-how* to lead and build strong international partnerships along the way.

## 02

**Universities must act swiftly to democratize knowledge**, define crystal clear research guidelines across the curriculum, define clear cut academic integrity standards and adopt them across the board. Similarly, **professors should partner with students** and engage them in research and forum participation. The academy as a whole in North Macedonia must re-establish a whole new relationship with the society based on mutual trust. **Academic integrity as a new concept both for the academia and for the society should be mutually negotiated and widely accepted as a universal societal value.**

## 03

**Every public university must be socially responsible and accountable** to allow the public sector, businesses, and the civil society sector to both conduct research inside the university but to also jointly work on research projects beneficial for the university, the society, and particular organizations and businesses. Similarly, students must be given access to the real world to conduct co-ops and various applied projects. To do this, universities must realign their educational goals and objectives and reflect this through their curricula.

## 04

**The Ministry of Education must serve as logistics to universities**, besides its false claim that they respect their autonomy. More specifically, **the ministry should depoliticize the Agency for Quality in Higher Education** through pushing for a change in its management and composition. The amendment of the law should also allow for **participation of foreign and domestic experts in both the accreditation and quality councils**, as opposed to its current composition of full-professors, who don't necessarily have the needed expertise and knowledge to serve. From a logistical position, the Ministry of Education should have a Higher Education Coordination Committee of Experts who will support universities to create international partnerships, lead a development agenda for carrying out the needed curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular reforms in order for the public university system to achieve the standards and ideals discussed in this document.

## 05

**Public universities must not be ethnically divided.** They may serve the local student populations but must make efforts to provide as much exposure for students to their counterparts in the country, regionally, and internationally. **We can't achieve SDG's through segregated university campuses** serving only one particular community. Similarly, **the ministry of education must legally prevent public universities to disperse into smaller towns.** Through an executive order, universities must bring back dispersed programs into their campuses in order to better serve the educational needs of students and more efficiently organize campus life for students. **University education is a universal public good and as such universities must be held accountable for the quality of higher education they provide to students.** Experts and researchers in higher education assert that universities should attract students to their campuses rather than campuses going closer to students in smaller towns. After all, **higher education should serve as a gateway to civilization** through exposing students to diversity through learning about other cultures, learning other languages, and opening their horizons to become global citizens of the world. This also calls for at least **30% student and staff mobility through exchange programs.** Most importantly, universities should work on establishing a 30%/30% outgoing and incoming exchange ratio of students in the next phase of eight to ten years. **Increasing the number of incoming exchange students will have a much higher impact on reforming campus climates and cultures.** This element calls for immediate **creation of English programs**, on at least 70% of existing programs.

## 06

**Larger university systems such as St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje should be reorganized in larger schools rather than function in a decentralized fashion.** For quality assurance and enhancement reasons, the university could create **at least four schools** (for example: School of Medical Sciences, School of Computer and Civil Engineering, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, School of Applied Natural Sciences). Deans of schools could be provided more room for managing quality through more resources while the university president (rector) could oversee and steer the whole system on a larger scale. This a normal practice in larger public university systems in the United States and the EU. Finally, **some of the public universities in the country should redefine their public profile and possibly be transformed into polytechnics.** This would create a larger array of opportunities for students and will also lower the pressure to meet ranking standards. Polytechnics should still be research-centered, nonetheless, their mission would be to partner with businesses and manufacturing enterprises in order to co-create and shape a whole new consumer-oriented market based on values and a fair competition.

## 07

**Every public university should have a physical library as well access to a robust online database.**

Given the scarcity of resources among universities in North Macedonia, this substantial reform operation should be implemented on the systems level. As the country has a relatively small number of public universities, the solution could be to create one major online library hub, where all universities will get access to. The Ministry of Education should work on the government level so that citizen tax funds can go towards this noble and crucial higher education intervention. Civil society organizations, as direct representatives of the citizens and students, should initiate this large-scale and costly reform, without which the value of universities in the country is questionable. The importance of this operation should be emphasized on the highest levels of forums, among academics, policy-makers, students, and nonprofit organizations working on the improvement of the quality of higher education. The need for universities to have access to library resources, similar to those at US universities, is long overdue, while the operation could also be pushed through a massive citizen participation in a referendum. This is how important this intervention is.

## 08

**To be able to transform universities into research ones, professor workloads should be lowered, balanced, and divided between research and teaching.**

Professors should be given the choice to choose from the specific workload available according to rank. For example, Assistant Professors could be given a 50%/50% teaching and research workload. For this rank, it is very important as instructors aspire to navigate through the tenure track. For Associate Professors, a 70%/30% research/teaching ratio could be implemented, while for full professors, a 90%/10% ratio may be implemented. We must be aware that research conducted by academics is of utmost importance for the development of universities at large, but most importantly, for the development of a knowledge-based society. Guidelines for ranks should be adopted from universities in the EU or the United States, as we don't want to establish neoliberal standards of promotion seldom impacted by inside and outside political pressures. A reform in the master and doctoral studies model (see more details in the next solution) would be beneficial as it could foresee engagement of students in research and teaching undergraduate classes.

## 09

As mentioned in the previous solution, **a major reform is needed in the master and doctoral studies.**

**We must look at the opportunity to create two streams of master and doctoral programs, i.e. professional and academic.**

We are currently loaded with master and doctoral candidates whose pursuit of knowledge is nowhere near academic ones. In order not to compromise the quality of academic, scholarly, and research work conducted in the postgraduate level of studies, we must find a way to put a line between the pursuit of academic and professional postgraduate work. It is undoubtedly true that this is quite unconventional, but most sincerely, we currently do not possess the academic, scholarly and research skills to carry out high quality mentorship for an uncompromised level of quality in the postgraduate level. Until we conduct the most needed structural reform in higher education, we could look at the possibility of offering a professional line of postgraduate studies. As far as academic postgraduate studies are concerned, we must create a small group of highly qualified international university professors, across the spectrum of programs, who would mentor and direct these thesis and dissertations. This could be a temporary solution which at the same time could lower the number of master and doctoral candidates pursuing them. In other words, **we must put an end to**

phony and banal master's and doctoral topics, which usually don't serve any academic or scholarly purpose. Most importantly, we must standardize Academic Writing in all levels of higher education, including the writing of Master's thesis and Doctoral dissertations.

## 10

To improve retention and increase graduation rates, semesters should be organized and delivered during fall and spring sessions and should last no more than 14 weeks. Similarly, exam sessions (which originally last for a month) should last for a week and should be referred to as fall semester exam weeks and spring semester exam weeks. This is an excellent way to allow students to be task and school oriented and be able to graduate on time. **University education must not be solely based on exams**, a majority of which are still orally administered, but rather, **each class should be task-based while an exam must not be valued or more than 30% of the class**. According to this, a student may no more fail an exam, but rather, in very specific circumstances, the whole class. In other words, **failing a class is minimized due to the fact that a student must work continuously throughout the semester and finish her/his work in smaller units rather than all at once in the form of a final exam**. This model allows for critical reform to take place and **higher education to become research-based, task-based, problem-based, and internship-based**. Summer schools or semesters must be available for students who wish to graduate earlier, but most importantly, summer periods should be available for students to attend exchange programs or work-and-study in different parts of the world. Similarly, **our public universities must organize International Summer Schools for all levels of students, in order to democratize knowledge through an internationalization approach**.

## 11

Through a wider partnership initiative on an institutional level, supported by the systems level, we must redefine the contours of conducting research, starting from the way we teach it in undergraduate levels. That being said, **research methodology is currently inexistent in many undergraduate programs in public universities in North Macedonia**, including the one program taken as an example in this document. This must be revisited and amended immediately as it undermines the value a university should have in the society. Research should become central in master and doctoral studies and to do that, a whole new research infrastructure should be built for each university. To be able to properly use the infrastructure, academics must be able to take their research skills to the next level in order for the infrastructure to be beneficial.

## 12

**Universities must carry out a curricular reform, as explained above, to implement an interdisciplinary general education approach and allow students to become better versions of themselves and more engaged citizens in the democratic processes in the country**. Previous studies on student activism and engagement throughout university studies (see MOF 2015)[28] show little or no engagement by students in campus life. More precisely, the initial study found that 63.5% of surveyed students at UKIM (the largest public university in the country) had never voted on student government elections while 40% of them had never participated in student protests. What is more, the study found that more than 70% of students had never participated in the organization of any kind of event pertaining student life on campus. While the aim of this current document is to provide solutions

[28] Studentot kako Nositel na Opstestveni Promeni. Mladinski Obrazoven Forum, Skopje. Available at: [mof.mk](http://mof.mk). Accessed on December 27, 2021.

for creating active citizens upon graduation, establishing a factual situation of low student activism during studies aids the overall argumentation that a complete campus climate change is long overdue. Through a systematic interdisciplinary curricular reform and a student-centered inclusive campus climate, student activism both on-campus and upon graduation shall be increased. Education for democratic citizenship and education for sustainable development, once included in the curriculum, must yield positive results. Similarly, student engagement on campus through research work, master teaching assistantships, and doctoral research assistantships, shall create a vibrant student-centered campus climate rather than one based on rigid bureaucratic administration, as it is presently.

## 13

Finally, **academic integrity should be incorporated in all mission statements at all public universities in the country.** We must also redefine the relationship universities have with the society. In other words, we must make extra efforts that universities gain back the lost trust by the society through systematically communicating each university's commitment to integrity and pursuit of knowledge in a transparent way and in collaboration with students, civic organizations, businesses, and government institutions.

## 14

In sum, **there is loads of work to be conducted to transform universities into cradles of civilization and cornerstones of democracies.** Nonetheless, we must use all the potential we have in the country and from our partners in order to shape a whole new higher education realm. This will help the country tackle all its challenges that lie ahead in its path to establishing lasting peace and internal reconciliation. Our democracy is fragile while our graduates do not possess civic and research capacities to reimagine the future. **We must act now and reform higher education to co-create a sustainable democracy where everyone has their fair-share.**



