

**QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY IN HIGHER
EDUCATION**



THEMATIC REPORT

THE LINK BETWEEN STUDY PROGRAMS AND THE LABOUR MARKET


December 2025

Analysis based on ASCAL External Evaluation Reports for the accreditation processes of study programs in the first half of 2025.

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1. INTRODUCTION, METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL CONTEXT

1.1.Introduction

The Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL), in fulfilling its legal and institutional mission, plays a key role in ensuring and continuously improving the quality of higher education in the Republic of Albania. Through its external quality assurance processes, ASCAL evaluates the compliance of higher education institutions and study programs with national standards, as well as their alignment with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), promoting an institutional culture of quality, transparency, public accountability, and continuous improvement.

Within this framework, thematic analysis constitute an important strategic tool of ASCAL's activities, as they enable a structured analysis of trends, findings, and issues identified during external evaluation processes. These reports serve as an analytical overview of the higher education system in Albania and as a guiding instrument for improving policies, strengthening regulatory tools, and further harmonising with European standards.

The focus of this thematic report on the link between study programs and the labour market and student employability relates to the strategic importance of this topic in the context of rapid economic, technological, and professional transformations. In this regard, employability represents a key dimension of the relevance and effectiveness of study programs, as well as of the contribution of higher education institutions to the development of the country's human and economic capital.

The analysis of this topic reflects the expectations of the main stakeholders in the higher education system: students, higher education institutions, employers, and society as a whole. Quality assurance, in this context, is not limited to the academic dimension but also includes the assessment of how study programs address labour market needs and translate into students' real competencies.

This report aims to provide a structured assessment, based on the analysis of external evaluation reports, of how higher education institutions link study programs to the labour market. In particular, it examines mechanisms for engaging external stakeholders, professional practice, student competencies, employment and graduate tracking, as well as career and employability support activities, highlighting both recurring challenges and transferable good practices.

Through this analysis, ASCAL seeks to support higher education institutions in identifying areas for improvement and strengthening capacities for curriculum planning, results monitoring, and sustainable collaboration with external stakeholders, ultimately contributing to a higher quality, more relevant, and economically and socially oriented higher education system.

1.2.Methodology

This thematic report has been prepared based on a structured methodological approach, oriented towards the analysis of evidence generated from external quality assurance processes, in line with the role of the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) as the responsible authority for external quality assurance in higher education. The methodology aims to ensure objectivity, coherence, and comparability of findings, in accordance with the principles of transparency, independence, and continuous improvement, as well as with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG).

The primary source of data consists of the external evaluation reports of study programs, prepared and published by ASCAL during the first half of 2025. These official documents, based on the independent assessment of external experts, form the basis of the analysis in this report and provide support with verified evidence.

The reports were analysed thematically and comparatively, focusing on the link between study programs and the labour market, as well as student employability. The analysis concentrated on identifying labour market demands, professional practice, the development of student competencies, employment and graduate tracking, and the alignment of programs with the changing needs of the labour market. Additionally, a comparative approach was applied across fields of study and between public and nonpublic institutions, with the aim of identifying models, effective practices, and systemic issues.

The methodology is based on the principle of analytical triangulation, combining descriptive analysis with critical interpretation of findings in relation to quality assurance standards, the regulatory framework, and contemporary developments in higher education. The analysis maintains an institutional, non-punitive, and developmental character, aiming to identify trends and structural issues rather than evaluating the individual performance of institutions or specific programs. Findings should not be interpreted as a direct evaluation of any higher education institution, but as trends observed in the sample of reports analysed.

In this way, the methodology provides a robust basis for formulating the report's conclusions and recommendations, supporting higher education institutions in improving their practices and strengthening an evidence-based approach to quality assurance and the relevance of study programs to labour market and societal needs.

1.3.General overview of the analysed data

The thematic report is built on the analysis of a broad and representative sample of study programs, whose external evaluation reports were completed by the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) during the first half of 2025 and are also published on its official website. In total, this report analyses the external evaluation reports for **67 study programs**, representing a diverse range of higher education institutions, fields of study, cycles of study, and types of accreditation. This volume and diversity of data provide a robust and reliable basis for identifying trends, recurring findings, and structural issues related to the alignment of study programs with the labour market and student employability. The analysis has been developed based on a structured approach, divided into the following main directions:

- ✚ Legal organisation of the institution;
- ✚ Fields of study;
- ✚ Cycle and type of the program;
- ✚ Type of accreditation.

With regard to the **distribution according to the legal organisation of the institution**, the analyzed programs are offered by both categories of higher education institutions, public and nonpublic. Specifically, 31 analyzed programs are offered by public institutions and 36 programs by nonpublic institutions. This distribution indicates a relative balance between the two categories of institutions and has enabled a comparative analysis of approaches to the labour market and employability, reflecting the structural, organisational, and functional differences that characterise each category of institution.

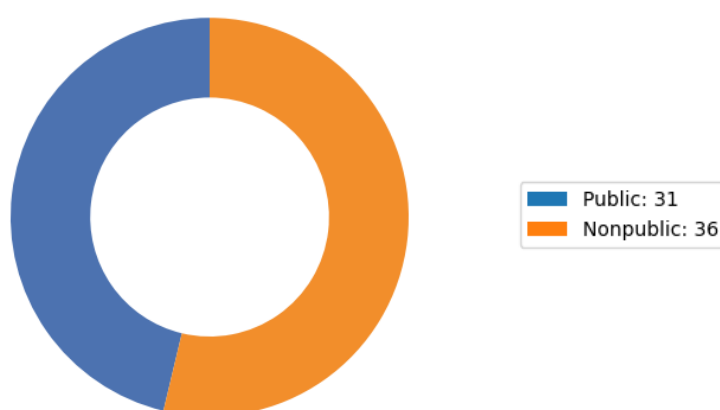


Figure 1: Distribution by the legal organisation of the institution

In terms of **distribution by fields of study**, the data show a significant concentration of programs in fields with high social and professional demand. Humanities and Social Sciences constitute the largest group with 18 programs, followed by Economic Sciences and Medical Sciences, each with 15 programs. Engineering Sciences and Philological and Education Sciences are represented with 7 programs each, while Agricultural Sciences include 2 programs. Other fields, such as Arts and Sports, Military and Police Sciences, and Natural Sciences, are represented by 1 program each. This distribution provides an opportunity to analyse the link between programs and the labour market across different disciplinary contexts.

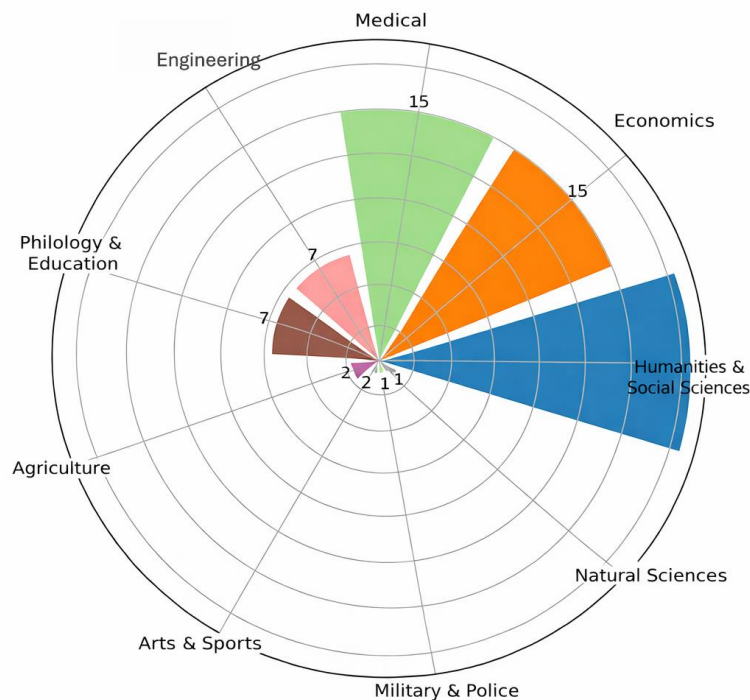


Figure 2: Distribution by fields of study

Regarding the distribution by **cycle and type of program**, first-cycle “Bachelor” programs constitute the largest portion of the analyzed programs, with a total of 26 programs, followed by second-cycle “Master of Science” programs with 18 programs and “Professional Master” programs with 14 programs. Additionally, the analysis includes 4 professionally oriented programs, 4 third-cycle “Long-Term Specialized Studies” programs, and 1 integrated second-cycle “Master of Science” program. This distribution provides the report with a comprehensive view of the diversity of higher education offerings and enables the analysis of employability according to different levels and qualification profiles.

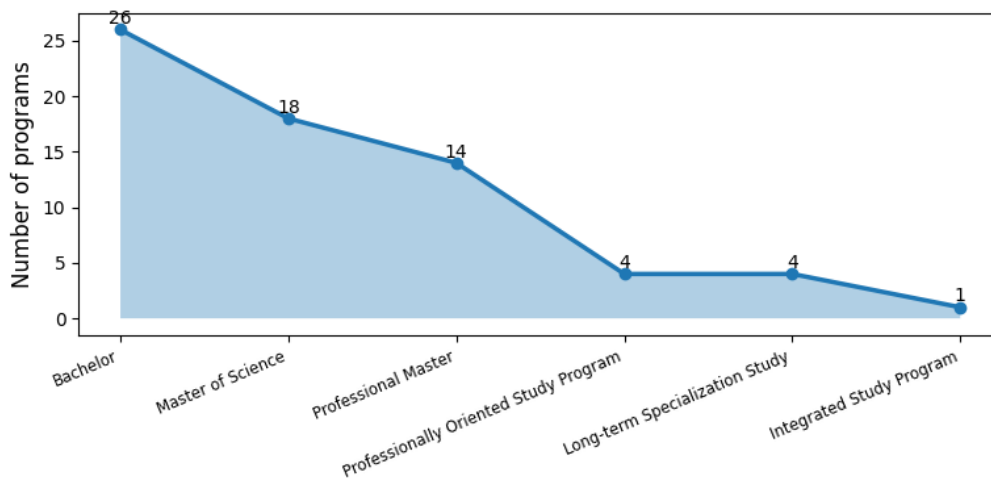


Figure 3: Distribution by cycle and type of program

Regarding the **type of accreditation**, the majority of programs included in the analysis are programs that have undergone the initial accreditation process, specifically 50 programs, while 17 programs were evaluated as part of periodic accreditation. This distribution has provided an opportunity to observe the differences between programs at the initial consolidation stage and those with previous accreditation experience, particularly in the way the link with the labour market and student employability is conceptualised, implemented, and documented.

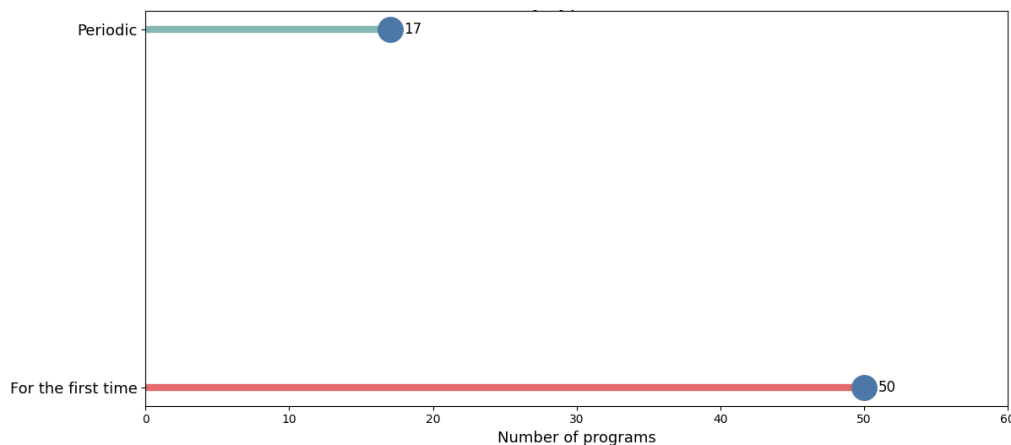


Figure 4: Distribution by type of accreditation

Overall, the data used for the preparation of this thematic report constitute a broad, balanced, and methodologically robust sample, enabling a deep and comprehensive analysis of issues related to the labour market in higher education. This configuration of data provides the report with added analytical value and makes it an important reference tool for higher education institutions, policymakers, and other stakeholders interested in the development and improvement of the quality and relevance of study programs in Albania.

2. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

2.1.Labour market demands and mechanisms for engaging external stakeholders

The analysis of labour market demands, across different fields and study profiles, shows that higher education institutions are aware of the importance of aligning study programs with labour market needs and strive to justify their relevance. However, the level of analytical depth, formalisation, and documentation of this justification varies significantly between programs and institutions.

In most cases, the link with the labour market is argued mainly qualitatively, through collaborations, agreements, and professional practices, reflecting the ongoing engagement of institutions with market realities. Nevertheless, there is room to further strengthen this link through more systematic support based on structured labour market studies. The analysis indicates that programs connected to clearly defined professional sectors with evident market demand, such as engineering, construction, infrastructure, industrial pharmacy, or certain social service profiles, present a more consolidated justification, with more precise identification of professional profiles and better reflection of sectoral trends in the curriculum. Meanwhile, in broader academic fields, such as teaching and some social sciences disciplines, the argument for market demand relies more on experience and traditional practices, suggesting opportunities to deepen supply and demand analyses. In some cases, labour market studies are referenced, providing a valuable basis, but these could be further reinforced by focusing more specifically on program profiles and integrating them more clearly into curriculum planning and review processes.

Another aspect that could be further developed concerns the creation of a more unified methodological approach for labour market analysis and the involvement of external stakeholders. Although different forms of collaboration exist, strengthening them through analytical documentation, with clear indicators and conclusions directly linked to program development, would further increase their impact.

The involvement of external stakeholders and employers is widely recognised as a key element by institutions and is reflected in various activities, such as professional practices, joint activities, and the establishment of contacts with the labour market. A further step would be the more structured integration of this collaboration into program design and review processes so that their contribution is even more directly reflected in academic content.

In some programs, there is more advanced involvement of external stakeholders in consultations for the launch or review of programs and in identifying the competencies required by the labour market, representing very positive co-creation practices in academic offerings. Strengthening the documentation of the concrete impact of this

contribution on curriculum changes and academic decision-making would help consolidate and disseminate these good practices.

A frequently observed issue relates to the lack of formalised evidence on the involvement of external stakeholders, which makes it more difficult to fully assess the effectiveness of the collaboration and limits its structured reflection. Nevertheless, a clear strong point in this component is that almost all programs aim to prepare graduates for specific professional roles and have developed forms of collaboration with the labour market, creating good potential for professional practice, employability, and external feedback. In some cases, programs have also been designed to respond to specific gaps in the market, reflecting a good understanding of labour demand and supply dynamics.

Overall, the analysis shows that alignment with the labour market is present both conceptually and in practice. There is room to further strengthen this alignment at the strategic and documentation level, through a more structured, data-supported approach, integrated consistently into the development cycle of study programs, with the aim of further enhancing graduate employability.

2.2. Professional practice and the link with the labour market

In the analyzed reports, professional practice is presented in almost all programs as the main mechanism for establishing a concrete link with the labour market and as one of the most direct tools for preparing students for employment. This demonstrates a clear orientation of programs towards practical application and employability. At the same time, it is evident that there is potential to further develop this component by strengthening the transition from the mere formal existence of internships to their functioning as a more structured, monitored process, closely integrated with the achievement of learning outcomes and employability.

The analysis of professional practice shows that it constitutes the primary mechanism linking study programs with the labour market and is one of the most consolidated components of interaction between higher education institutions and the professional environment. In the analyzed reports, it is noted that professional practice is included in almost all programs as a mandatory part of the curriculum and is implemented through collaborations with public, private, and professional organisations, creating real opportunities for workplace exposure, the development of practical skills, and the strengthening of transferable competencies.

At the same time, the analysis suggests that there is potential to further enrich this component by moving from a focus primarily on the existence of agreements and the number of host institutions towards a deeper assessment of the quality of internship

content, process standardisation, and its impact on students' professional development. In some cases, there is room to strengthen the link between professional practice, program objectives, and learning outcomes, as well as to ensure greater consistency of the internship experience across different student groups and host institutions. Within this context, professional practice is widely recognised as a highly positive and valuable element, while a more structured approach would make it even more comparable and verifiable in terms of outcomes.

However, the analysis highlights a useful distinction between the formal existence of professional practice and its functioning as a well-structured, monitored process, closely integrated with the achievement of learning outcomes and employability. This distinction suggests concrete opportunities for further development through the strengthening of mechanisms for linking, monitoring, and evaluating internships, so that they contribute even more directly to enhancing the quality of study programs.

A recurring finding is that professional practice often serves as the main, and in some cases the only, tool for building the link with the labour market, playing a compensatory role in the absence of more advanced interaction mechanisms such as joint projects, engagement of field professionals in teaching, structured mentoring, or co-creation of curricula. In some programs, this link remains almost exclusively focused on the provision of internships, without regular collection and analysis of feedback from host institutions and without documented reflection of this feedback in program review and improvement.

On the other hand, the reports also highlight positive practices, where professional practice is clearly organised, supervised by academic and professional mentors, linked to the competencies intended to be developed, and accompanied by defined objectives, assessment, and structured feedback. These models demonstrate that when internships are managed systematically and in an integrated manner, they contribute directly to enhancing student employability.

The analysis identifies room for further development of standardised mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating professional practice, as well as for improving the collection of structured data on outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, and impact on post-graduation employment. Documentation of the process is, in some cases, fragmented, limiting the full utilisation of internships as a valuable source of evidence for the continuous improvement of programs. Strengthening these elements would allow for a more systematic use of information generated from professional practice, contributing more directly to the enhancement of program quality and relevance.

As a result, the link with the labour market, although active and functional at the practical level, shows potential for further development towards more sustainable and strategic long-term partnerships, which could contribute even more directly to curriculum updates and the strengthening of the quality assurance cycle.

Overall, professional practice constitutes a strong point of study programs and an important basis for interaction with the labour market. However, a more integrated, standardised, and evidence-based approach would help further increase its impact on program quality and student employability.

2.3. Competencies and student skills in relation to labour market demands

The analysis of the competencies and skills that students acquire through study programs shows that this dimension is widely considered by higher education institutions as an important element in the design and justification of programs, particularly in relation to labour market demands. However, a review of the reports indicates that the development of competencies is not always presented as a measurable outcome and is not always evaluated in a structured manner. Programs generally include extensive lists of professional competencies, knowledge, and transferable skills intended for students to acquire, but in some cases there is not a fully direct link between these stated competencies and concrete evidence of their achievement.

Programs typically describe professional competencies and transferable skills in accordance with formal qualification frameworks, yet in some cases it is observed that the connection between these objectives, learning outcomes, and assessment tools is not entirely clear. Consequently, competencies tend to be treated more as general aims than as well-defined and verifiable learning outcomes.

The analysis suggests that professional competencies in study programs are mainly linked to the content of courses and the formal structure of the curriculum, while their connection with learning outcomes and assessment methods could be further strengthened. Programs often describe the skills students are expected to acquire upon graduation, but they do not always detail the pedagogical and assessment mechanisms through which these skills are developed, measured, and consolidated during the study cycle. This may create a slight mismatch between the formal conception of the program and the learning experience, making it more challenging to fully assess the effectiveness of programs in developing competencies required by the labour market.

Transferable and interdisciplinary skills are widely recognised, at a declarative level, as important for enhancing student employability, but they are not always addressed in a structured and measurable way. Competencies such as professional communication, use of digital technologies, work in multidisciplinary environments, analytical skills, and adaptability are often mentioned in program documentation and evaluation reports, but they are not always accompanied by clear indicators demonstrating the level of student mastery.

On the other hand, the reports also highlight positive practices, particularly in programs where competencies are clearly linked to specific professional profiles and explicit labour market requirements. In these cases, the development of practical skills is supported through laboratories, applied projects, professional internships, and fieldwork, creating opportunities for direct interaction with real or simulated professional situations. These models show that when competencies are coherently integrated into the curriculum and learning process, they contribute directly to better preparing students for the labour market.

However, a recurring issue concerns the need to strengthen consolidated mechanisms for assessing competencies at the program level. The reports primarily focus on knowledge assessment through traditional testing methods, while the assessment of practical skills, professional competencies, and transferable skills is sometimes more limited or less structured. This suggests that, although competencies are reflected in institutional discourse and program documents, their integration into the student assessment system could be further developed.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that higher education institutions have taken significant steps towards orienting study programs to develop competencies and skills required by the labour market. However, in some cases, these efforts remain mainly conceptual, highlighting the need for clearer and more consistent mechanisms for measuring and evaluating their achievement. A further direction for development involves building a more integrated and evidence-based approach, where competencies are coherently linked with learning outcomes, teaching processes, and assessment tools, serving as measurable and reliable indicators of the quality and relevance of study programs.

2.4. Employment and graduate tracking

The analysis of student and graduate employment shows that this dimension is treated by higher education institutions as an important element for evaluating the effectiveness of study programs, but it is not yet consistently used as a fully developed analytical tool for measuring their real impact on the labour market. In the analysed reports, employment is primarily described qualitatively, relying more on perceptions and expected potential rather than on structured, verifiable, and continuously tracked data.

In most programs, employment is described as possible or expected, particularly in fields with a clear professional orientation. This approach is especially present in programs related to regulated professions or sectors that traditionally absorb labour, where a direct link between the degree and employment is assumed. However, the reports rarely provide concrete data on the actual employment level, time to labour

market integration, employment sectors, or the alignment between study profile and employment.

A recurring finding is that institutions mainly rely on professional practices, collaboration agreements, and informal contacts with employers as indirect indicators of student employment. Professional practice is widely recognised as a positive mechanism that creates bridges with the labour market and increases the potential for post-graduation employment. However, the analysed reports often lack an assessment of the extent to which these practices translate into actual employment, and more broadly, there is a lack of structured and continuous tracking of students' and graduates' professional pathways after completing their studies.

In some programs, efforts are made to collect information on graduate employment through alumni contacts, ad hoc surveys, or general assessments by academic staff. These initiatives represent positive steps towards building a culture of outcome monitoring, but they are usually fragmented, non-periodic, and non-standardised. As a result, graduate tracking does not become a sustainable institutional mechanism, and the collected data are not systematically used as performance indicators for study programs or as a basis for curriculum review.

The analysis also shows that in a significant number of programs, employment is described more in terms of potential rather than actual outcomes. Programs outline possible employment fields, professional positions, and targeted competencies, but without linking this description to empirical data on what actually occurs after graduation. This creates a clear gap between the program design and the assessment of its real impact on the labour market.

Strengths of this component relate to the clear professional orientation of most programs and the preparation of students for specific roles in the labour market, supported by mandatory internships, projects connected to professional reality, and collaborations with host institutions. These elements provide an important foundation for enhancing employability, if complemented by structured monitoring and analysis mechanisms.

However, the analysis highlights the lack of sustainable mechanisms for tracking students and graduates. Consolidating standardised surveys, alumni databases, and analyses of alignment between study profiles and employment remains essential for transforming employment into a measurable indicator of program quality and effectiveness.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that higher education institutions have a clear orientation towards student employability, but this orientation has not yet been consolidated into a structured and integrated system for monitoring employment and tracking graduates. The main challenge emerging from the analysed reports is the

development of a sustainable institutional system for tracking employment outcomes, which would serve not only for formal reporting but also as a practical tool for reviewing study programs, improving teaching practices, and strengthening the effective link between higher education and the labour market.

2.5. Career and employability support activities

The analysis of the component related to activities carried out in support of students shows that this dimension is treated by higher education institutions as an important supportive element of the learning process and the preparation of students for integration into the labour market. However, in some cases, it is observed that these activities are not yet presented as part of a fully structured, planned, and systematically evaluated mechanism. A review of the reports shows that institutions offer a relatively wide range of student support activities, but these activities are mainly described qualitatively and are less integrated into an analytical framework that would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of their impact on students' academic and professional experience.

In most cases, student support activities include academic guidance, individual and group counselling, support during professional internships, information on employment opportunities, as well as the organisation of training or informational activities with labour market actors. These initiatives demonstrate the institutions' efforts to create more favourable conditions for students' academic and professional development. However, in some cases, the reports do not provide sufficient information on the accessibility of these activities, the level of student participation, or their suitability for the needs of different student groups.

The analysis suggests that student support is mainly justified through the existence of formal structures, such as career or counselling offices, while data on their functioning and concrete outcomes are more limited. In some cases, information on the coverage of services, student engagement, and the impact of activities is missing, making this dimension appear more as a consolidated structural capacity with potential for further development towards a more active and monitored approach.

A recurring finding is that student support activities are sometimes delivered in a fragmented manner, more as a response to immediate needs rather than as part of a fully integrated and long-term institutional approach. This is particularly noticeable in activities related to career orientation and employability, where initiatives are useful and welcomed by students but are not always planned continuously or clearly linked to the strategic objectives of the study programs.

On the other hand, positive practices are identified where institutions provide more structured forms of support, such as career orientation programs, training sessions, and preparatory activities for the labour market, which contribute to increasing students' readiness for professional integration.

The analysis also indicates that there is room to strengthen clear and standardised mechanisms for assessing the impact of student support activities. In some cases, reports include fewer measurable indicators of their effectiveness, such as employment outcomes, skills development, or student satisfaction. Consequently, the monitoring and improvement of these activities could benefit from a more systematic and evidence-based approach.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that higher education institutions have developed a range of student support activities, which provide an important foundation for improving the academic and professional experience. However, to further increase their impact, these activities could benefit from fuller integration into a sustainable, structured, and monitored system, clearly linked to the objectives of study programs and employability outcomes. In this way, student support activities can be further consolidated as strategic instruments contributing to the enhancement of quality and effectiveness in relation to labour market needs.

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

3.1. Comparative analysis by fields of study

The comparative analysis by fields of study highlights differences in the level and manner in which study programs align with the labour market.

Programs in the fields of engineering, technology and health tend to show a more direct link to the labour market, supported by relatively high demand for these profiles, as well as the presence of more structured professional internships and well-developed laboratory components. At the same time, programs in the social sciences and humanities sometimes exhibit a more indirect connection to the labour market, often reflected in a more general manner in the documentation. Meanwhile, the field of education is characterised by a stable level of employability in the local labour market, although there is room for improvement in terms of documentation and more systematic tracking of employment data.

The integrated analysis of labour market-related components – including employment, professional practice, competencies, program alignment, student support activities, and the involvement of external stakeholders – suggests that the way these dimensions are conceived and operate varies considerably across different fields of study, reflecting the specific characteristics and dynamics of each field.

Engineering Sciences

Programs in the field of engineering sciences tend to exhibit a high level of documented and well-justified alignment with the labour market. Reports indicate that labour market demands are identified relatively clearly, professional profiles are well-defined, and the targeted competencies are concrete, technical, and largely measurable. Curriculum revisions are closely linked to sectoral developments, such as infrastructure, construction technologies, biomedical engineering, and diagnostic technologies, reflecting a functional relationship between academic offerings and professional demand.

Student and graduate employment is highlighted not only descriptively but also through concrete examples of employment following professional internships, particularly in periodically accredited programs. Professional practice appears as a key component and, in many cases, contributes directly to integration into the labour market. However, even in this field, there is room for further development of standardized statistical reporting on employment, as the current analysis relies primarily on qualitative evidence.

Technical and digital competencies are presented as well-developed and aligned with contemporary standards, while student support activities are relatively structured and

functional. A further area for development relates to the formalisation of periodic labour market analyses and the establishment of sustainable systems for tracking employment outcomes.

Philological and Educational Sciences

In the field of philological and educational sciences, the alignment of study programs with labor market needs appears to be well-established at a conceptual and institutional level, while in some cases it could be further strengthened analytically. Teacher education programs are primarily designed based on the needs of the public and local education system, where the labor market is relatively regulated and predictable. As a result, labor market requirements are often addressed through institutional consultations rather than formalized labor market studies.

Graduate employment generally reflects stable levels and is largely consistent with the study profiles, although the reports do not always include structured statistical data on employment rates, time to employment, or professional mobility. Professional practice is well-integrated into the study programs, while there remains room for development in further standardizing documentation and evaluation mechanisms among hosting institutions.

Pedagogical competencies are clearly defined and aligned with the relevant national frameworks, although there is an ongoing need to strengthen digital competencies, improve foreign language skills, and continuously update the literature. Student support activities exist, but in some cases they function more as isolated initiatives, leaving scope for their development as part of a more integrated system aimed at enhancing employability.

Agricultural Sciences

Study programs in agricultural sciences demonstrate a natural connection with the labor market due to the direct role this sector plays in economic and regional development. The reports reflect a clear awareness of labor market needs and the importance of the practical dimension of study programs; however, in some cases this orientation is not fully accompanied by structured analytical instruments.

Labor market demands are described mainly in local and general terms, while evidence on employment is more often presented indirectly. Professional practice is included in the study programs, but in some cases it could be strengthened in terms of standardization and monitoring its impact on employment.

Overall, this field shows considerable potential for further strengthening its connection with the labor market by benefiting from greater formalization of processes and improvements in data documentation and analysis.

Arts and Sports

In the field of arts and sports, the relationship with the labor market appears in some cases more diverse and less linear. Programs justify their alignment mainly through the development of creative, artistic, and physical competences, as well as through involvement in projects and practical activities. Employment is often addressed in terms of potential and opportunities for self-employment, while structured data on career tracking are not always available.

Professional practice and the involvement of external stakeholders are implemented in some cases, but not always in a systematic way or integrated into sustainable monitoring mechanisms. Supporting activities for students are present; however, their impact is not always fully evidenced in the analyzed reports.

Military and Police Sciences

Study programs in military and police sciences represent a special case, where alignment with the labor market is largely ensured by the institutional structure itself. Labor market requirements are clearly defined, competencies are well specified, and professional practice is directly integrated into the training process. Graduate employment is generally predictable and largely guaranteed, which reduces the need for classical labor market analyses.

However, the reports identify areas for development in strengthening feedback mechanisms from external stakeholders, as well as increasing flexibility to adapt to technological and organizational developments.

Natural Sciences

In the field of natural sciences, several challenges are identified regarding the connection with the labor market. Programs are mainly oriented toward theoretical and academic training, while alignment with the labor market is more often argued in terms of research potential rather than direct employment. Labor market studies are in some cases limited, and professional practice is not always structured or included as a mandatory component.

Graduate employment is not always analyzed systematically, and supporting activities appear more limited compared to some other fields. In this context, there is room for further development in strengthening the link between academic training and labor market demands.

3.2. Comparative analysis by legal organization of the institution (Public/Nonpublic)

The analysis of findings from external evaluation reports shows that the way higher education institutions conceptualize and implement the link between study programs and the labor market varies depending on the legal organization of the institution, namely between public and nonpublic institutions. These differences are not related only to organizational choices but also reflect different models of institutional functioning, different levels of flexibility in relation to labor market demands, and different approaches to the use of analytical instruments for quality assurance.

In public higher education institutions, the link with the labor market is built mainly on their institutional role in serving the public interest and supporting the higher education system. Study programs, especially in fields such as education, social sciences, public services, and some health profiles, justify their alignment with the labor market by relying on the needs of the public system, national sectoral policies, and the demands of relatively stable and regulated local labor markets. This approach gives public institutions a consolidated position in relation to employability within regulated professional profiles, while at the same time creating space for further development of more dynamic and standardized instruments for labor market analysis.

External evaluation reports show that, in public institutions, labor market demand is argued mainly in qualitative terms, through references to strategic documents, sectoral plans, consultations with public institutions, and institutional experience accumulated over the years. Structured and periodic labor market studies are in some cases limited, while the analysis of demand for specific professional profiles often remains at a general level. As a result, alignment with the labor market appears more as a stable assumption rather than the result of continuous evidence-based analysis.

Graduate employment in public institutions is generally at satisfactory levels, especially in programs directly related to the public sector and regulated markets, where a relatively direct link between degree and employment can be observed. However, reports indicate that these results are not always accompanied by consolidated mechanisms for systematic graduate tracking. Employment data are in some cases fragmented and not standardized, limiting the possibility for comparative analysis over time or across programs.

Professional practice in public institutions represents a consolidated element both formally and organizationally. It is integrated into the curriculum, carried out in public institutions and structures directly related to the field of study, and supported by academic and institutional mentors. However, the analysis suggests that professional practice is not always accompanied by standardized monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and its impact on employment after graduation is not fully and

systematically documented. In this sense, practice remains an important training component, with potential to be further developed as an analytical instrument in support of quality and program relevance evaluation.

In nonpublic higher education institutions, the approach to the labor market appears in some cases more direct, more pragmatic, and more oriented toward concrete results. Study programs, especially in technical, economic, engineering, and medical fields, show a more functional connection with the labor market, supported by real demand for specific professional profiles and active cooperation with the private sector. Reports suggest that nonpublic institutions are characterized by greater flexibility in reviewing curricula, adapting course content, and integrating professional practice, thereby reflecting the dynamic developments and changes in labor market demands.

Graduate employment in these institutions is argued mainly through concrete cases, especially after the completion of professional practice, reflecting a more direct link between study programs and the labor market. This approach demonstrates a more active role of institutions in building partnerships with employers and facilitating professional contacts for students. However, employment tracking remains mainly qualitative and not yet standardized, as in some cases there are no consolidated systems for collecting, analyzing, and reporting statistical data on employment and graduates' professional trajectories. This situation may limit opportunities for comparative evaluation, both between institutions and across fields of study.

Professional practice in nonpublic institutions appears to be one of the most effective mechanisms for linking education with the labor market. It is supported by extensive networks of private partners, takes place in real professional environments, and in some cases is accompanied by concrete employment opportunities. However, the analysis suggests that the impact of practice is not always documented analytically and is not always accompanied by measurable indicators demonstrating its long-term effectiveness.

Overall, the comparative thematic analysis shows that public and nonpublic institutions follow different models in linking study programs with the labor market, while facing some common challenges at the analytical and methodological level. Public institutions may benefit from strengthening labor market analysis instruments and developing more systematic mechanisms for tracking employment outcomes, while nonpublic institutions may further consolidate documentation, standardization, and transparency of practices that currently function mainly at the operational level. In both cases, the main challenge is moving toward a more integrated and evidence-based approach that coherently links labor market analysis, graduate employment, competence development, and continuous improvement of study programs, in order to enhance quality and strengthen the role of higher education in the country's social and economic development.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. General conclusions

The thematic analysis of external evaluation reports shows that the link between study programs and the labor market, as well as student employability, represents one of the fundamental and shared challenges for the higher education system in Albania. The integrated analysis of the main components – labor market requirements, involvement of external stakeholders, professional practice, competences, employment, and support activities – suggests that higher education institutions have made consistent efforts to orient their academic offer toward student employability and the increased professional relevance of study programs.

The analyzed reports indicate a clear institutional awareness that the connection with the labor market constitutes an important element of the quality and sustainability of study programs. However, the analysis shows that this connection in some cases is developed mainly in a functional and descriptive manner, while there is room for its further development as a more structured, analytical, and evidence-based process. The level of formalization, analytical depth, and systematic use of data varies across programs, fields of study, and categories of institutions, reflecting a wide range of institutional approaches to the labor market.

Regarding the analysis of labor market needs and the involvement of external stakeholders, it is evident that these elements are present and functional in practice, but in some cases they are not yet fully consolidated at the strategic and documentation level. Alignment with the labor market is argued mainly through descriptive elements such as professional practice, cooperation agreements, and consultations with employers, while formal labor market studies, measurable indicators, and comparative analyses over time remain more limited. This creates room for further development of mechanisms that enable a more sustainable assessment of the real impact of programs on employability and the professional development of graduates.

The analysis also highlights differences between fields of study. Programs related to more structured sectors and with clear professional demand show higher levels of alignment with the labor market, while programs in more general academic fields, or in fields with a less formalized labor market, rely more often on conceptual argumentation rather than consolidated empirical evidence. These differences reflect not only the academic specifics of the fields but also the level of professional regulation, the tradition of cooperation with employers, and the degree of labor market structuring in the respective sectors.

Professional practice emerges as one of the most consolidated components of the link with the labor market and represents a strong point for most study programs. It is included in the curricula of almost all analyzed programs and is supported by numerous cooperation agreements with public and nonpublic institutions. However, in some

cases, the lack of standardization, structured monitoring, and documentation of results limits the potential of professional practice to become an analytical instrument for program improvement and for measuring its impact on employability.

Regarding student competences and skills, the analysis shows that programs present extensive lists of professional and transferable competences that students are expected to acquire; however, these are not always directly linked to learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment instruments. In particular, the need for further strengthening digital competences, foreign language skills, and interdisciplinary skills is highlighted, as these are increasingly important in relation to labor market requirements.

Student and graduate employment is addressed in most programs more as a reasonable expectation than as a systematically documented and tracked outcome. Although many programs demonstrate good employment potential and, in some cases, positive indicators of labor market integration within the study profile, structured statistical data on employment rates, time to employment, employment sectors, and alignment with the study profile are often lacking. Graduate tracking exists, but not always in formal, periodic, and standardized forms, which limits the use of these data for analytical and improvement purposes.

The analysis of student support activities shows that institutions provide a range of services and initiatives aimed at employability, such as career counseling, information on internships and employment opportunities, meetings with alumni, and professional activities. However, these activities in some cases are carried out in a fragmented manner and not always as part of an integrated institutional strategy. The lack of indicators to measure their real impact limits the role of these activities as comprehensive quality assurance instruments.

Overall, the analysis shows that the higher education system in Albania has established functional mechanisms for linking education with the labor market, but these mechanisms have not yet been consolidated into an integrated, standardized, and data-driven system. The main challenge remains the transition from a mainly descriptive and functional approach toward a systematic, analytical, and developmental approach, in which the labor market, employment, professional practice, and competence development serve as real instruments for planning, reviewing, and continuously improving study programs.

4.2.Recommendations

Based on the findings of this thematic report, it is recommended that higher education institutions direct their efforts toward consolidating a more structured and sustainable approach to linking study programs with the labor market.

First, higher education institutions should formalize labor market studies as a periodic institutional process. These studies should be based on measurable indicators, document the demand for professional profiles and key competences, and serve as a direct basis for decision-making regarding the opening, revision, and improvement of study programs.

Second, it is recommended to establish standardized mechanisms for tracking students and graduates through functional alumni databases, periodic questionnaires, and regular reporting of employment indicators. These data should serve as performance indicators for programs and as a basis for evidence-based curriculum revisions.

Third, professional practice should be treated as an integrated pedagogical process, with clear objectives, common standards, evaluation mechanisms, and systematic documentation of results and feedback from host institutions. This would enable its use as a real instrument for improving quality and employability.

Fourth, it is recommended to strengthen the link between competences, learning outcomes, and assessment, so that professional and transferable competences are transformed into measurable and comparable program outcomes.

Finally, the involvement of external stakeholders and employers should move from a mainly functional role toward strategic cooperation that is documented and clearly integrated into curriculum development and the quality assurance cycle.



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