

**BSFocus 3**

MARCH 2026

# **A REFORM FOR COMPETITIVENESS OR A SETBACK FOR THE NEW ACADEMIC GENERATION?**

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**iDEFE**



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## Introduction

Higher education constitutes one of the main pillars of any state's social, economic and scientific development. Higher education in the Republic of North Macedonia is at a crucial stage of reform, where challenges of quality, competitiveness and institutional development demand balanced, long-term solutions. The debate on the current state of the system encompasses key issues such as university autonomy, academic title advancement, sustainable funding and mechanisms for institutional accountability.

Higher education has undergone profound structural transformations in recent decades as a result of globalization, the massification of university studies, and the growing importance of knowledge-based economies. Universities are increasingly expected to enhance the quality of research, internationalize academic programs, and strengthen their links with labor markets and technological innovation. According to Philip G. Altbach, Liz Reisberg, and Laura E. Rumbley, the global higher education system is experiencing what they describe as an "academic revolution," characterized by the rapid expansion of universities, intensified international competition for academic prestige, and the growing centrality of scientific research as a driver of economic and social development. In this context, universities are no longer viewed merely as institutions that transmit knowledge but as strategic actors in fostering innovation, developing human capital, and shaping evidence-based public policy (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

According to the World Bank, higher education plays a crucial role in economic development, innovation, and the formation of human capital in modern societies. In the report *Higher Education for Development*, it is emphasized that universities serve as strategic institutions for the production of knowledge, the advancement of scientific research, and the preparation of skilled professionals who contribute to productivity growth and economic competitiveness. The report further highlights that for higher education systems to fulfill this role effectively, they must be supported by sustainable public policies, adequate funding for research and innovation, and institutional frameworks that ensure quality assurance, academic autonomy, and strong linkages with the economy and society (World Bank, 2017).

The contemporary debate on higher education reforms is closely linked to broader transformations in universities' roles and missions within society. In his analysis of the evolution of modern university systems, Simon Marginson argues that the traditional model of higher education based on the "California Idea"—which emphasized broad access, strong public investment, and high academic quality—has increasingly come under pressure due to marketization, rising tuition costs, and growing inequalities within university systems. According to Marginson, these changes reflect a shift from higher education as a public good toward a more competitive, market-oriented model, in which universities are increasingly driven by performance metrics, rankings, and financial sustainability. This transformation raises important questions about equity,

access, and the long-term sustainability of higher education systems, particularly in contexts where reforms are introduced without sufficient public investment or institutional support (Marginson, 2016).

Also, in his analysis of the development of world-class universities, Jamil Salmi emphasizes that achieving international academic excellence cannot be achieved solely through legal reforms or stricter academic standards. According to Salmi, world-class universities are typically characterized by three key elements: a high concentration of talent (qualified faculty and outstanding students), substantial financial resources to support research and infrastructure, and a governance system that ensures institutional autonomy and flexible management. He argues that without sustained investment in scientific research, support for academic staff, and long-term strategic planning, efforts to improve the quality and global competitiveness of universities remain limited and largely formal. Therefore, the development of high-quality universities depends on a broader ecosystem of policies, resources, and institutional capacity rather than on regulatory measures alone (Salmi, 2009).

In their analysis of the growing influence of market mechanisms in higher education, Pedro Teixeira and David Dill examine how the increasing marketization of universities has reshaped governance, funding structures, and institutional priorities. They argue that while market-oriented reforms—such as competition for students, performance-based funding, and greater institutional autonomy—can enhance efficiency and responsiveness, they also raise concerns about equity, academic

values, and the public mission of universities. According to Teixeira and Dill, the expansion of market principles in higher education may lead institutions to prioritize financial sustainability and competition over broader educational and social objectives, potentially creating tensions between the role of universities as public institutions and their increasing engagement with market dynamics (Teixeira & Dill, 2011).

Reforms in higher education are essential to improve the quality of studies, to strengthen scientific research and to harmonize the system with European and international standards. However, any reform must be built on the basis of respect for the Constitution, university autonomy and the principles of the rule of law. It is clear that the need to enact a law to raise the quality of higher education in the Republic of North Macedonia stems from the necessity of retaining students who migrate because of the quality, modernization and efficiency of the education system. Undoubtedly, social, economic and technological developments require an updated legal framework that responds to contemporary challenges.

Alignment with European standards, improvement of teaching quality, digitalization of education, reduction of administrative shortcomings, linking to the labor market and fair regulation of funding are the main pillars that a new higher education law should include. It should harmonize the system with the Bologna Process, increase mobility and the recognition of qualifications, establish clear quality standards, modernize administration and technology, strengthen cooperation with the economy and ensure

transparent, performance-based funding, supporting research and innovation.

## Questions and main dilemmas that confront each of us?

- The New Higher Education Law: Reform for Quality or a Blow to the New Generation?
- Quality and Competition or Inequality and Discrimination?
- Meritocracy or Institutional Monopoly?
- Autonomy or Centralization? What Does the New Proposed Higher Education Law Hide?
- Higher Education between Reform and Exclusion: Who Wins, Who Loses?

From an analysis of the key points, it can be said in principle that the proposed law aims to raise academic standards through stricter criteria for advancement, stronger quality control and internationalisation. But in reality, if we view it from a long-term developmental perspective, quality is not built solely by restrictive norms; it requires sustainable funding, research infrastructure, support for new staff and functional autonomy. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the law can only raise quality standards if it is accompanied by resources, a well-established pedagogical culture and supportive policies that take into account the historical approach to university creation, and the country's political, economic and cultur-

al context. If standards are applied without creating real conditions for development, then the law, instead of fostering healthy competition, risks producing pressure, inequality, centralisation and long-term stagnation in the higher education system.

## The State of Higher Education Institutions, Students and Lecturers

I am beginning the analysis with data for the period 2010/2011–2024/2025, which show a changing dynamic in higher education in the country. The number of institutions (faculties) has risen from 111 in 2010/2011 to 130 in 2024/2025, peaking at 136 institutions in 2017/2018. Meanwhile, the number of students has experienced an overall decline compared with the start of the period, from 61,148 students in 2010/2011 to 52,277 in 2024/2025, with slight fluctuations over the years and a more pronounced downward trend after 2015/2016.

In contrast, the number of lecturers has shown a steady increase, from 2,186 in 2010/2011 to 3,218 in 2024/2025. This indicates an expansion of academic capacity and an improvement in the student–lecturer ratio, despite the decline in student numbers. In structural terms, the higher education system has moved from a phase of institutional expansion to a period of stabilisation, with increases in academic staff and a more stable number of institutions in recent years.

## Higher Education (faculties)

Year	Institutions	Students	Lecturers
2010/2011	111	61148	2186
2011/2012	115	56873	2144
2012/2013	118	55842	2111
2013/2014	120	56697	2213
2014/2015	122	58399	2388

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2010/2011	111	61148	2186
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2012/2013	118	55842	2111
2013/2014	120	56697	2213
2014/2015	122	58399	2388
2015/2016	126	58896	2716
2016/2017	133	57263	2849
2017/2018	136	55795	2891
2018/2019	128	52785	3025
2019/2020	134	50985	3100
2020/2021	134	50150	3030
2021/2022	134	50863	3106
2022/2023	131	52999	3108
2023/2024	131	51160	3189
2024/2025	130	52277	3218

<b>Higher Education Institutions, Teachers and Collaborators 2024/2025</b>				
		<b>Total</b>	<b>Lecturers</b>	<b>Others staff</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>Universities</b>	<b>4832</b>	<b>3325</b>	<b>1507</b>
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University - Skopje	24	1970	1436	534
St. Clement of Ohrid University - Bitola	11	324	279	45
Goce Delchev University Shtip	16	635	388	247
University of Tetova	13	797	441	356
University for Information Science & Technology St. Paul the Apostle - Ohrid	5	21	18	3
Mother Teresa University in Skopje	8	88	70	18
South East European University	6	184	118	66
European University	6	60	48	12
American University of Europe – FON - Skopje	8	49	47	2
MIT University		142	86	56
University American College- Skopje		70	54	16
University of Skopje		37	31	6
International Balkan University	8	228	134	94
International Slavic University		49	38	11
Europa Prima - The International University		48	39	9
International Vision University	3	56	31	25
Euro College - PVPU Euro College - Kumanovo		10	10	-
Faculty of Business Economics – Skopje		18	14	4
Faculty of Islamic Sciences – Skopje		10	10	-
Brainster Next College		10	10	-
Heidelberg Faculty of Skopje		13	13	-
Business Academy Smilevski – BAS		13	10	3

From the perspective of teaching staff at higher education institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia, the data for the 2024/ academic year 2025 show that in the Republic of North Macedonia a total of 4,832 lecturers and collaborators are employed in higher education institutions, of whom 3,325 are lecturers and 1,507 are collaborators. The largest share of the staff is concentrated in public universities, particularly at the University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, which with 1,970 employees (1,436 lecturers and 534 associates) represents the main academic centre in the country. Following it are the University of Tetovo with 797 employees and the 'Goce Delčev' University in Štip with 635, reflecting the distribution of academic capacity according to size and institutional development. Smaller public universities, such as 'Saint Apostle Paul' in Ohrid and 'Mother Teresa' in Skopje, have a significantly more limited number of staff, which indicates pronounced structural differences between the institutions.

In the private and international sectors, a more compact staffing structure is observed, with lower numbers in both teaching staff and collaborators. The Balkan International University has 228 employees, while the SEE University in Tetovo has 184, making them among the private institutions with the largest academic capacity. Other private institutions, such as AUEFON, MIT, the American College University, or academies and higher professional schools, operate with reduced staff and, in some cases, without engaged collaborators. Overall, the staffing structure shows a clear dominance of public universities in

terms of human capacity, while the private sector is characterised by a smaller, more focused organisation, which directly impacts research potential, academic offerings and institutional development.

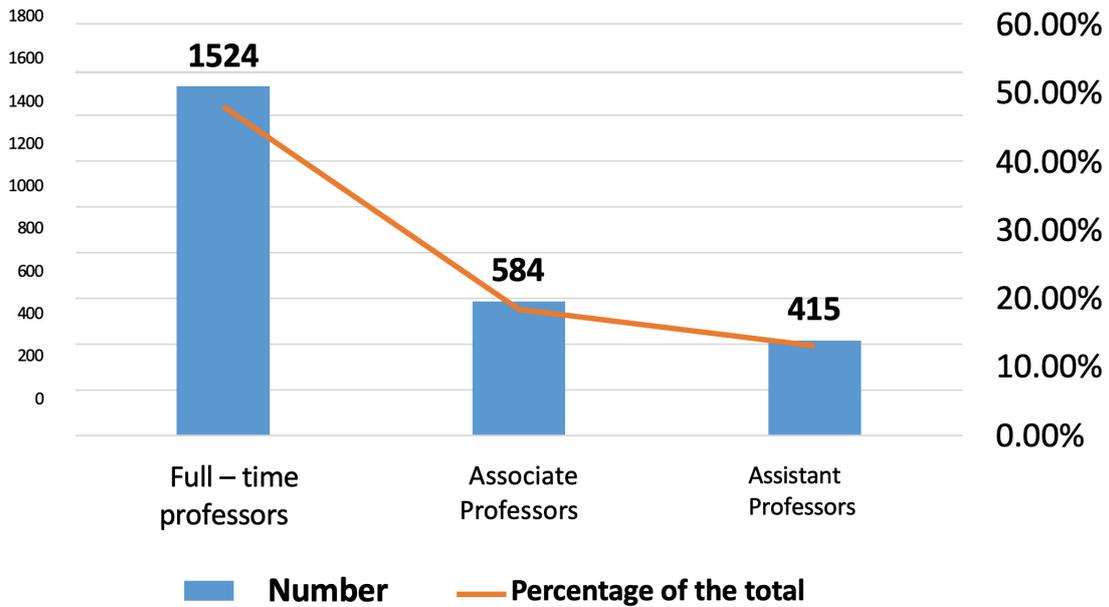
## Structure of Academic Teaching Titles in the Republic of North Macedonia

The structure of academic teaching titles in the North Macedonia shows a clear dominance of full professors (ordinarius) within the university system. According to the presented data, 1,524 full professors account for 47.91% of the total staff holding academic teaching titles. This indicates a significant concentration of academic capacity at the highest level of the university career ladder.

At the second level, there are 584 associate professors (extraordinarius), representing 18.35% of the total. This segment constitutes an important part of the academic hierarchy and typically represents a transitional stage toward the title of full-time professor.

Meanwhile, 415 assistant professors account for only 13.04% of the total. This relatively lower percentage of staff at the initial stage of the academic career may signal a slowdown in the generational renewal of university personnel, especially when compared to the high proportion of full professors.

Academic Title	Number	Percentage of the total
Full – time professors (ordinarius)	1 524	47.91%
Associate Professors	584	18.35%
Assistant Professors	415	13.04%



From a structural perspective, these data suggest a system heavily weighted toward senior academic ranks, while the representation of younger academic staff (assistant professors) is noticeably more limited. Such a structure may have implications for academic advancement dynamics, succession planning, and the long-term development of universities.

The structure of academic titles by university reveals significant differences between public and private institutions, as well as between well-established universities and newer ones.

Traditional public universities such as Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, St. Clement of Ohrid University of Bitola, and Goce Delčev University of Štip are

characterized by a high percentage of full professors (ranging from 52% to 68%), indicating a more stabilized structure with a strong concentration of staff at the highest academic ranks. In particular, St. Clement of Ohrid University of Bitola has the highest percentage of full professors (68.11%), while Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje represents the institution with the largest absolute number of academic staff (1,434 in total).

In contrast, newer or smaller universities show a more balanced distribution or one oriented toward lower academic ranks. Mother Teresa University in Skopje and International Balkan University have lower percentages of full professors and higher shares of associate or assistant professors,

reflecting their stage of institutional development and the need for further academic consolidation.

A particular case is MIT University Skopje and International Vision University, where the category of assistant professors clearly dominates (over 38%–57%), indicating a comparatively younger staff structure.

Overall, the presented landscape reflects a university system marked by structural disparities between established institutions and those still in development, both in terms of academic experience and the consolidation of hierarchical academic ranks.

UNIVERSITIES	Prof. Dr. (nr. / %)	Assoc.Prof. Dr. (nr. / %)	Assist.Prof. Dr. (nr. / %)	Total
<b>Ss. Cyril and Methodius University</b>	<b>843 / 58.81%</b>	<b>207 / 14.43%</b>	<b>93 / 6.49%</b>	<b>1 434</b>
<b>St. Clement of Ohrid University - Bitola</b>	<b>173 / 68.11%</b>	<b>35 / 13.78%</b>	<b>18 / 7.09%</b>	<b>254</b>
<b>Goce Delchev University Shtip</b>	<b>175 / 52.08%</b>	<b>73 / 21.73%</b>	<b>36 / 10.71%</b>	<b>336</b>
<b>University of Tetova</b>	<b>130 / 33.77%</b>	<b>125 / 32.47%</b>	<b>74 / 19.22%</b>	<b>385</b>
<b>Mother Teresa University in Skopje</b>	<b>16 / 18.18%</b>	<b>32 / 36.36%</b>	<b>22 / 25.00%</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>University of Information Science and Technology (UIST) "St. Paul the Apostle"</b>	<b>4 / 19.05%</b>	<b>10 / 47.62%</b>	<b>4 / 19.05%</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>South East European University</b>	<b>47 / 59.49%</b>	<b>14 / 17.72%</b>	<b>14 / 17.72%</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>American University of Europe – FON - Skopje</b>	<b>24 / 48.98%</b>	<b>16 / 32.65%</b>	<b>7 / 14.29%</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>University American College Skopje</b>	<b>22 / 31.43%</b>	<b>7 / 10.00%</b>	<b>15 / 21.43%</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>MIT University</b>	<b>9 / 8.91%</b>	<b>11 / 10.89%</b>	<b>58 / 57.43%</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>European University</b>	<b>9 / 29.03%</b>	<b>5 / 16.13%</b>	<b>9 / 29.03%</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>UTM Shkup</b>	<b>14 / 42.42%</b>	<b>5 / 15.15%</b>	<b>8 / 24.24%</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>International Vision University - Gostivar</b>	<b>4 / 8.16%</b>	<b>4 / 8.16%</b>	<b>19 / 38.78%</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>International Slavic University</b>	<b>14 / 28.57%</b>	<b>16 / 32.65%</b>	<b>8 / 16.33%</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Europa Prima - The International University</b>	<b>6 / 60.00%</b>	<b>3 / 30.00%</b>	<b>1 / 10.00%</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>International Balkan University</b>	<b>26 / 18.71%</b>	<b>18 / 12.95%</b>	<b>28 / 20.14%</b>	<b>139</b>

## Base Budget Funding and Self-Financing – 2026

The data for 2026 indicate a mixed structure of university financing in North Macedonia, where the main source remains the state base budget, but with varying levels of dependence on self-generated income.

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje (UKIM) has the largest total budget, amounting to 110.1 million, of which 64.6% is secured from the base state budget and 31.6% from self-financing, reflecting a considerable level of own-source revenue generation. A similar structure is observed at Goce Delčev University of Štip, where 28.9% of funds come from self-financing and 64.3% from the state budget. St. Clement of Ohrid University of Bitola relies on

70.3% public funding and 25% self-financing, while the University of Tetova shows a higher dependence on the base budget (77.8%) and a lower share of self-financing (18.9%).

Smaller public universities demonstrate even greater reliance on state funding. Mother Teresa University in Skopje is financed 82.8% from the base budget and only 12.8% from own sources, while the University of Information Science and Technology “St. Paul the Apostle” receives 70.3% public funding and 15.5% self-financing. Overall, the financial structure reflects a system in which larger universities possess greater capacity to generate their own revenues, whereas smaller institutions remain more dependent on the state budget. This inequality in financial autonomy may directly affect research development, infrastructure investment, and the long-term competitive capacity of universities.

Institution	Total	From base budget	From self-financing
UKIM (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University)	110,146,585	71,210,976	34,777,886
St. Clement of Ohrid University - Bitola	18,571,951	13,062,602	4,633,740
University of Tetova	21,996,260	17,110,407	4,154,146
Goce Delchev University - Shtip	21,400,699	13,755,024	6,190,390
University of Information Science and Technology (UIST)	1,282,455	902,016	198,325
Mother Teresa University - Skopje	5,868,049	4,860,715	752,016
SEEU (South East European University)	1,219,512	1,219,512	-

## Financing percentage – Year 2026

Institution	% from the base budget	%from self-financing
UKIM (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University)	64.6%	31.6%
St. Clement of Ohrid University - Bitola	70.3%	25.0%
University of Tetova	77.8%	18.9%
Goce Delchev University - Shtip	64.3%	28.9%
University of Information Science and Technology (UIST)	70.3%	15.5%
Mother Teresa University - Skopje	82.8%	12.8%

From the perspective of part-time students, data for the 2024/2025 academic year show that out of a total of 53,535 students enrolled in university studies in North Macedonia, 6,610 or 12% are part-time students, while 88% pursue their studies as full-time students. The participation of part-time students is more pronounced in private institutions (22%) compared to public institutions (10%), indicating that study formats involving partial engagement or greater flexibility are more prevalent in the private sector. At the national level, the 12% share of part-time students demonstrates that this category constitutes a significant segment of the higher education system.

**The main viewpoints regarding the Draft Law on Higher Education** focus on the balance between raising standards and preserving university autonomy. One of the fundamental concerns relates to the high level of regulation and state intervention,

which is perceived as limiting institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The main aspects and approaches of the law that should be reconsidered are:

1. The law is highly regulated (strictly normative), with detailed provisions and pronounced state (institutional) intervention, thereby limiting university autonomy, financial independence, and institutional flexibility. Instead of establishing a long-term vision, it focuses on formal control and imperative measures, without a clear orientation toward the future, digital transformation, and the development of contemporary higher education. Quality cannot be improved through administrative orders, but rather through the creation of real conditions for scientific

- research, infrastructure development, sustainable funding, and support for academic staff.
2. The absence of a clear, inclusive, and structured consultation process with universities, senates, and trade unions as equal institutional partners reduces the legitimacy of the law, creates difficulties in its practical implementation, and may undermine university autonomy.
  3. University autonomy is a fundamental principle guaranteed by the Constitution. University autonomy implies the right of academic institutions to independently decide on their organization, study programs, scientific research, and internal management. Therefore, a serious issue in the law is identified in Article 86, which foresees considerable influence of the executive branch through the University Council. It stipulates that four members are to be proposed by the government, without the inclusion of representatives of the university trade union and representatives of the north-western chamber of commerce.
  4. Article 63 – Termination of the Activity of a Higher Education Institution – defines the conditions and procedure for the discontinuation of the activity of a higher education institution. Clear and transparent criteria should be elaborated here in order to prevent arbitrary (governmental) decisions undertaken (or proposed) by the ministry.
  5. The National Council for Higher Education has a composition heavily influenced by the government. In regional countries such as Slovenia and Serbia, government representation ranges from 18–28%, whereas in North Macedonia it reaches up to 50%. This raises concerns regarding university autonomy and academic independence. Quality is not built through formal norms and control; it is fostered through autonomy, good working conditions, research investment, and respect for meritocracy.
  6. Article 164 provides that the loss of an academic title automatically results in the termination of employment, creating a harsh consequence without clear transitional mechanisms. This poses risks of legal uncertainty and judicial disputes, and raises questions about the proportionality of this measure. Specifically, Article 164 stipulates the automatic loss of the job in case of non-reappointment. This mechanism undermines the constitutional right to employment, legal security, and professional stability (degrading the academic standing) of staff who have already fulfilled the requirements for obtaining the lowest academic title. Provisions that foresee automatic termination in case of non-reappointment or impose rigid bibliometric criteria, such as the h-index, create insecurity and

unfairness in certain scientific disciplines. A modern higher education system should support professional development through fair evaluation, development programs, and institutional support—not through punitive measures that can demotivate academic staff. Job security and fair treatment are key factors for the quality of teaching and research.

7. The establishment of criteria that favor certain institutions for the development of the third cycle, or that are based on national and international rankings as a legal requirement, may create inequalities and limit the development of newer domestic universities. Likewise, requiring signatures for the accreditation of new academic programs from professors working at the top three nationally ranked universities creates unfair competition and disparities. Reforms should provide equal opportunities for all institutions and promote quality through investment, transparency, and fair standards—not through discriminatory restrictions.
8. The research budget is insufficient compared to other countries, with North Macedonia investing only 0.3% of GDP in research—far below the European standard of 1.5–3% of GDP. At the same time, universities are continuously required to increase the percentage of self-financed funds used for investments. This dependency on self-financing poses the risk that universities may rely on these funds, shifting focus from academic and scientific quality toward student recruitment. Furthermore, the possibility for the Ministry of Finance to make changes to financial plans, along with the requirement for prior government approval of tuition fees, constitutes direct intervention. This reduces relative autonomy, increases uncertainty in long-term planning, and keeps universities dependent on external approvals even for their internal resources.
9. Strengthening the criteria for advancement in academic titles with higher requirements for publications in impact-factor journals requires gradual implementation and a transitional period. High standards, without sufficient financial and infrastructural support, may place younger academic staff and newer universities at a disadvantage, creating the perception that advancement is impossible without substantial resources. The law also fails to give adequate attention to pedagogical training, knowledge transfer, and the development of student skills, focusing almost entirely on the research pillar.
10. The criteria for appointment and reappointment to academic titles are almost exclusively oriented toward research outcomes, without evaluating teaching and institutional contribution. However, the role

of a university professor encompasses not only research but also the quality of lecturing, mentoring, and engagement in academic life. Therefore, the advancement system should reflect all three dimensions. Furthermore, participation in conferences and scientific gatherings—which is not considered a criterion for academic advancement—is essential for international networking, peer evaluation of ideas, and institutional promotion. If the state aims to improve scientific quality, it should not only set formal criteria but also create real conditions for active engagement in the international academic community.

11. The funding paradox is fundamental and structural: the Ministry pays professors for teaching activities according to their title, while the law requires appointment and reappointment based solely on research results. This creates a situation where those who do not conduct research risk losing their jobs, whereas those who do conduct research are not paid for it, but only for teaching hours.
12. Newly established universities, due to a higher proportion of assistant and associate professors and the lack of research groups and infrastructure, may find themselves in a less favorable position compared to consolidated universities. New universities typically have fewer full professors, more staff in the early stages of academic development, and more limited research and financial capacities. This places them at a disadvantage relative to established universities, which have more full professors and stronger scientific capacities. Therefore, if criteria for doctoral programs, projects, and academic advancement rely primarily on existing capacities, there is a risk of deepening inequalities, slowing their development, and consolidating the dominance of established universities. Any reform should ensure developmental balance and supportive mechanisms, taking into account that not all institutions have the same resources and infrastructure to meet identical standards.
13. International rankings are a consequence, not an end in themselves. The goal should be to build a healthy system that produces knowledge, innovation, and societal impact, rather than pursuing short-term objectives of entering rankings such as the Shanghai list purely through quantitative metrics. If conditions are created for quality research and sustainable development, international recognition will naturally follow as a result of long-term work.
14. The law stipulates that an assistant must hold the position for three years before being eligible for promotion to associate professor. However, what happens to staff who earn their doctorates from highly

ranked universities according to the Shanghai list? This provision may create not an opportunity but a real obstacle, perceived as discrimination against those who obtain their PhDs abroad. Instead of encouraging the return of highly trained staff from prestigious universities, barriers and uncertainties are created regarding their recognition and advancement. This sends the wrong message about the internationalization of our higher education system.

15. The law is unlikely to substantially improve quality if it allows an average grade of 8.00 to be calculated cumulatively from both the first and second cycles for academic appointments. This lowers the real selection threshold and does not ensure a high and sustainable standard of academic excellence.
16. Article 124 restricts the organization of doctoral studies to universities that meet high and cumulative conditions, such as being ranked among the top four and having a minimum of 15 years of operation. These risks limiting competition, centralizing the third cycle, and hindering the development of newer universities, while raising questions about the objectivity of the ranking criterion. In Article 124, paragraph (1), subparagraph 1, it is proposed that the 15-year operational criterion be reduced to 10 years to ensure more equitable treatment among universities and to reflect the institutional

reality in the country. Furthermore, it is proposed to adjust other criteria to make them more realistic and implementable, for example, fulfilling a criterion of 500 publications with an impact factor and 50 international projects, which is achievable for a university like Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje with around 2,000 employees and over 600 study programs, but not for newer universities such as Mother Teresa University in Skopje, which has around 100 employees and about 50 study programs. Therefore, it is proposed to replace this with a new criterion requiring that 25% of the academic staff have published in international journals with an impact factor and 25% of the academic staff have participated in international projects.

17. Article 161 requires a high number of scientific publications within a short period, creating pressure on academic staff, risking a focus on quantity over quality, and posing challenges for certain fields. It therefore requires a balance between high standards and practical feasibility. In Article 161, it is proposed to remove the requirement for the h-index, as this indicator is not always representative across all scientific fields and may create inequality rather than quality. Instead, it is proposed that the criterion be based on the publication of at least five scientific papers, three of which should be in journals with an impact factor

indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. Additionally, it is proposed to include as criteria teaching hours and courses, conference participation, and the publication of educational materials, thereby evaluating contribution to the educational process.

18. Serious issues are also identified in Articles 198 and 199, which allow administrative interventions that could lead to the suspension of a university's operations or the annulment of its decisions without judicial review. This constitutes an infringement on autonomy and the right to legal protection. In Article 198, paragraph (1), it is proposed that the one-month deadline be extended to a period of at least six months to one year, to allow sufficient time for the implementation of legal provisions. Furthermore, it is proposed that decisions not be made solely by the minister, but based on a report from a group of experts including representatives from the Ministry, the Government, the University, and other relevant higher education institutions.
19. The new law significantly increases fines, imposes mandatory suspension of activities, and adds personal liability and strict quality control. However, this punitive approach may create pressure and financial uncertainty, especially for newer universities, encouraging formalism rather than real improvement

of quality. Therefore, a preventive approach is needed, with advisory support, correction periods, clear procedures, and training.

20. Joint Degree Accreditation – The requirement for universities to establish agreements for double degrees (joint degrees) or joint programs with Top-500 universities according to ARWU and to undergo international accreditation before certain authorities is an ambitious but potentially unrealistic demand. Joint degrees require long-term collaboration, deep curriculum harmonization, mutual accreditation, and institutional trust. Imposing a formal requirement without considering actual capacities risks producing symbolic agreements instead of substantial partnerships that genuinely enhance quality and internationalization.
21. The draft law allows nepotism, as it lacks provisions preventing the appointment of relatives within the same faculty.
22. The new law withdraws titled appointments (prohibits them), which complicates the functioning of newly established, unconsolidated universities with academic staff, and risks the closure of study programs or faculties.
23. The retirement of a large number of professors within a short period creates a risk of staff shortages, lack of personnel in certain fields, increased

workload for junior staff, decreased teaching quality, and difficulties in covering study programs and supervising or mentoring doctoral students. Therefore, strategic planning of academic appointments is essential.

University, academic, legal, and financial autonomy forms the foundation for the free and effective functioning of universities, ensuring independent organization of study programs, the election of governing bodies, and management of financial resources. At the same time, advancement in academic titles through strengthened criteria and encouragement of scientific output aims to increase competition and academic quality. However, issues related to the funding model, as well as provisions concerning violations, fines, and sanctions, raise discussions about the balance between state control and institutional autonomy. For this reason, the analysis of these elements is essential to assess whether the proposed reforms will lead to a higher-quality and more sustainable higher education system.

Systematic analysis shows that the combination of personalized financial accountability, executive influence in university bodies, and the possibility of administrative intervention creates a real risk of indirectly limiting university autonomy. A realistic scenario is one in which a university may face punitive measures due to a lack of infrastructure, which results from insufficient state funding rather than legal violations.

## Suggestions

Reforms in higher education are essential for modernizing the system, but they must be harmonized with the Constitution and European standards. Any reform should respect university autonomy as a constitutionally guaranteed right and as the foundation of academic freedom.

The university statute should be approved by the Senate as the highest academic body, without requiring government approval—government oversight should be limited to supervision only.

The composition of the University Council should ensure a majority from the academic community to prevent political influence in decision-making.

Reforms must guarantee legal security and protection of academic staff rights in accordance with the Constitution.

Automatic loss of employment in case of non-reappointment should be replaced with protective mechanisms and a transitional period.

Criteria for academic advancement should be fair, flexible, and determined by the universities themselves, not imposed by law. The h-index should not be a mandatory legal criterion, as it creates inequality among different scientific disciplines.

Academic evaluation should include scientific publications, teaching engagement, conference participation, and contributions to the development of education.

Criteria for organizing doctoral studies must be realistic and aligned with the capacities of domestic universities. Reforms should ensure equal treatment for all universities and avoid discriminatory criteria such as 15 years of operation or 500 publications, replacing them with relative measures, for example, requiring that 25% of academic staff have publications with impact factors and 25% participate in international projects.

The state must provide stable and adequate funding for scientific research to meet academic requirements.

Universities should not be penalized for lack of infrastructure resulting from insufficient state funding.

State oversight should be corrective rather than punitive toward higher education institutions.

Decisions to suspend or terminate a university's operations should be based solely on

judicial rulings, not administrative actions. Deadlines for implementing standards should be realistic and allow sufficient time for compliance.

The reform process should involve universities, senators, and the academic community (senates, inter-university conferences, the academy, and the national council) in an inclusive manner.

Reforms should aim to improve the quality of education rather than create administrative pressure on institutions.

Harmonization of the law with the Constitution is essential to ensure a fair, autonomous, and sustainable higher education system.

Restoration of titled appointments.

Prevention of nepotism.

Inclusion of trade unions and chambers of commerce in the Governing Council.

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*Printed by:* Ajgraf

*Cite this paper:*

Bela B. (2026), A Reform for Competitiveness or a Setback for the New Academic Generation?,

BSF Focus, Skopje: IDEFE Publications.

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