



Graduation Related Concerns: Albanian Students and University Studies

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Abstract

Although a significant number of young people continue to leave our country in search of a better future, Albania continues to be a country with a relatively young population. Albanian youth faces a lot of challenges in their way to build their future. Unemployment is a complex social issue that is associated with a number of other social phenomena, which make the situation/position, especially of young people, even more disadvantaged. Young people, found in such a situation, where jobs are scarce and their skills or preparation does not help or facilitate to find a job, face the dilemma of staying or moving elsewhere for a better future. Because of the force with which these issues strike and affect the lives and opportunities for young people, young people prefer to leave and it seems the provision of material goods is becoming the mainly impetus for young people nowadays. Beside gathering and exploring the literature, reports and data related to the paper, 50 open questions interviews were conducted with bachelor students, respectively 25 students from University of "Aleksander Moisiu", Durrës, 25 students from University of Tirana. As the survey data shows, what young people express a kind of concern that their education will not bring the expected improvement of their future. Measures need to be taken to improve this situation, which can only be achieved through the commitment and involvement of all actors to bring a change and improvement of a situation that is alarming to our entire society.

Keywords: Youth; Albanian society; Higher Education; Challenges; Expectations;

1. Introduction

Although a significant number of young people continue to leave our country in search of a better future, Albania continues to be a country with a relatively young population. About 24% of the population is dominated by the age group of 15-29 years old, constituting the largest group of active force and work force in our society (Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, 2015: p. 7). According to the data of the National Report "Youth in Albania 2020", Albania counts 661,365 young men and women in the age group 15-29 years during 2019-2020, about 23.2% to the entire population. (CRCA/ECPAT Albania, 2020: p. 7). The study of young people in the Albanian society is important especially if we take into account that our country is characterized by a relatively young population.

Since the fall of the communist regime, Albanian society has faced a wide range of changes in all its structures and is still experiencing a critical economic and social situation. Rapid developments and the extended transition have brought a number of issues such as: rising poverty and inequality, rising unemployment rates, deteriorating of living standards and the emergence of at-risk groups (such as young people, the unemployed, the poor, retirees, etc.), and many other social and economic issues (INSTAT, 2005: 3; AIFS, 2013: 9). The pressure of these changes, especially the economic crisis, has a great impact especially on young people (Lundberg, M., and Warmly, A., 2012: 111), who face poverty, prolonged dependence on families and the state, few opportunities to be educated, to be employed, etc. (Barry, M., 2005; Giroux, H., 2009). These conditions constitute a serious obstacle to strengthening the potential of Albanian youth (Lëvizja Mjaft dhe Instituti Agenda, 2012: 3).

On the other hand, young people raised in Albanian society after the fall of the communist regime faced many issues and phenomena unknown to their parents. High unemployment, rising migration, property issues, transition, human trafficking, rising crime, drugs, alcohol, and many other social phenomena, which made young people's lives, in a way, more difficult and more problematic than that of their parents. According to the Albanian sociologist Zyhdri Dervishi,

sharp social and economic problems have led to a gradual increase in the degree of individualization, isolation, and focus on economic relations (Dervishi, Z., 2004: 56).

From the data of the National Report "Youth in Albania 2020", it results that our country continues to have a very high number of young people who go abroad for a better life. Although the first six months of 2020 Albania's borders remained partially closed, in the last ten years 140,390 young men and women have left Albania. Youth unemployment continues to be a major problem, which, as in any previous report, marks inconsistencies between official data and those of various studies and surveys. Young graduates are the ones who suffer the highest levels of unemployment (CRCA/ECPAT Albania, 2020: p 5-6).

"Albania has not been very friendly with its young men and women. Data statistics collected from official sources in Albania, the European Union and from reports of international organizations, show that the negative phenomena that have accompanied the development of the country, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities, etc. have affected to some great extent in the departure of young men and women from Albania" (CRCA Albania, 2018: pg. 17).

2. Methodology

Beside gathering and exploring the literature, reports and data related to the paper, 50 open questions interviews were conducted with bachelor students, respectively 20 students from the Faculty of Education, Aleksander Moisiu Durres University, 15 students from the Faculty of Economics, University of Tirana and 15 students from the Faculty of History - Philology, University of Tirana. The interviews took place during September - December 2019, and lasted mostly 30 to 40 minutes with each student. The interviewed students were randomly selected based on the prior consent to be part of the interviews. During the interviews it was taken into account to maintain gender equality between the interviewed students (25 males and 25 females). The selection of the Faculties involved was not intentional, their selection was decided based on the facilities of the interviewer to be in contact with the interviewed students. Through the interviews was intended to discuss about the experiences and opinions of young people about the opportunities and issues that concern them for the future, especially after graduation.

3. Education and Youth

Education is very important for the Albanian society in general, especially if we take into account that our society is characterized by a relatively young population. Education is important for preparing young people to enter the labor market, to improve human living conditions, including the protection of personal rights and the opportunity to participate in community institutions (INSTAT, 2004: p. 14). Thus, education is very important for individuals in particular and society in general.

With the fall of the communist regime, many educational institutions collapsed and became dysfunctional, leaving a large number of children and young people without facilities to attend the learning process. The drastic changes also led to a decline in the training of teaching staff in schools, as many teachers dropped out of school to pursue other more lucrative activities, such as trade business, or became involved in the wave of internal and external migration. Further, the events of 1997 exacerbated the situation. During these years education seemed to have lost its importance, men emigrated, girls were locked inside the walls of their house. Many girls discontinued their education which would further deepen the unemployment crisis among young women.

Although the situation has changed nowadays, the education system continues to face a number of changes and challenges to adapt to the rapid changes and growing demands of society. Data from the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) show that the educational level of young people in the Republic of Albania is increasing rapidly. Enrollment of young people in universities has been increasing, from 122 thousand in the academic year 2009-2010 to 174 thousand in 2013-2014. In recent years, the number of female students has been higher than that of male students, which in the academic year of 2013-2014 has reached 57.0 percent. About 66.0 percent of university graduates are female (INSTAT, 2015(a): 43-47).

Also according to statistics for Education declared by the Institute of Statistics, the number of young people enrolled in higher or vocational education has increased in the academic year 2018 - 2019 (139043 enrolled students) compared to 2017 - 2018 (131883 enrolled students). From the Statistics of the graduated students in 2018, 63.3% of graduates were female and 36.7% were male. According to these data, female graduates and male graduates by fields of study, hold different percentages among graduates in total. Areas in which more female students graduated were "Health and Welfare" with 78.9%, followed by "Education" with 77.7% and "Social Sciences, Journalism and Information" with

74.2%. Areas in which male students mainly graduated are "Engineering, Production and Construction" with 61.7%, and "Information and Communication Technology" with 56.3%¹. So the so-called female branches continue to have a predominance of female students and same for the male students and the so-called male branches².

However, despite the growing number of graduates, school dropout continues to be an issue for the Albanian education system (Unicef Albania, 2000: p. 9; 22). The situation is more severe in villages, where many schools are closed, others that are still open lack the physical and human conditions to develop a quality learning process. High dropout rates deprive youth of the opportunity to pursue other levels of education in the future, thus limiting their opportunities in the future.

In addition to the above issues, the attitude of young people and even other age groups towards education was influenced as a result of several factors such as:

- a. Significant lack of job opportunities as a result of the destruction of the state sector after the fall of the communist regime.
- b. Having a university degree no longer meant that you could have a secure job position.
- c. The income you can derive from employment in the public sector is insufficient to meet the needs of daily living.
- d. Engagement in the private sector did not necessarily require education at university level, when the private sector continues to maintain low rates of development.
- e. Immediate economic needs posed to meet the daily needs of living.

All of this somewhat diminished the importance and role that education had played before. Young people, and even other age groups in society, focused on addressing the most immediate needs that lay before them, not thinking about the benefits that education would bring in the future. They suffered from high unemployment and the lack of economic incomes to meet daily expenses. Consequently they needed to focus on ways that could solve them as quickly as possible, education is not a fast track solution. Emigration was seen as an opportunity for men to provide economic income, for them and their family. As these incomes were much higher than those that could be obtained in the labor market in Albania, this served to encourage young people to drop out of school and go abroad. Young men attitudes toward education were particularly influenced by their economic income needs, unlike those of young women, who were somehow forced to drop out of school by others. Both of these attitudes were influenced by the patriarchal mentalities of gender role-sharing, the fall of regime and after the events of 1997 served as tools used by society with patriarchal elements to strengthen its power and served as incentives to once again place women and men in the position dictated by gender roles. Men had to provide for the maintenance of the family, as required by their gender role, young women had to engage in their household chores, as required by their gender role.

Despite the problems that have accompanied the education system and the attitude of young people towards it, education continues to be considered as one of the most important factors for youth development. According to researchers, in general, schools are considered as a social institutions that equips young people with a sense of purpose, direction and ability to enter the labor market (Delgado, M., 2004: 62). Regarding the Albanian youth, according to the sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi, the more educated the Albanians are, the more independent and capable they feel to solve with their own forces their personal issues (Dervishi, Z., 2002: 55).

On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that society is developing rapidly and changing constantly, and the role of the school in preparing young people to cope with these changes is very important. But, according to Delgado, in these conditions, the school is not preparing young people for the changing world (Delgado, M., 2004: 31). One of the important functions of the education system in this changing society is the connecting role between educated individuals and the labor market (Wyn, J., and White, R., 1997). According to studies, in the Albanian society this type of role has significantly decreased. "The process of transition from being young to adult is very complex in Albania and among the main reasons why this happens lies in the deep-rooted mistakes of the inefficient education system of the country, which is still far from fulfilling its role, as a force that connects the educated and the workforce, as a potential for the local, national or even regional market" (Agenda Institute; Mjajt; World Bank, no year of publication: 18).

An important indicator is also the educational level of the employed youth. According to data on employees in 2009 about 56.0 percent of all employed young people had a low level of education, only 16.0 percent had higher education and more (ILO, 2010: 28). However, despite the fact that employment after graduation is difficult, higher education is considered important by young people, especially in terms of future employment. 70.9 percent of young people say that their goal to get a degree in higher education is to increase their employment opportunities (Levizja Mjajt; Agenda

¹Graduation statistics of 2017 – 2018, 3 Maj 2018, www.instat.gov.al

²Students for each Faculty and according to their study program, academic year 2017-2018, www.instat.gov.al

Institute, 2010: 21). Most Albanian youth see school as a rewarding experience, but young people from rural areas seem to value this experience more than their urban counterparts (Friedrich Ebert Foundation; IDRA Research and Consulting, 2013: 15). Given the socio-economic issues faced daily by residents living in villages, any opportunity that would serve to solve these problems would be used by them. Thus, it is understandable that young people living in rural areas, deprived of many opportunities, unlike young people living in cities, will value education more as a golden opportunity, even to leave the countryside.

A recent study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on youth highlights the growing concern of young people about the difficulty of finding work after graduation. Thus, from the data of their study, it results that 54% of young people state that they would find it difficult and very difficult to find a job after finishing their education. Moreover, 63% of young people interviewed state that the system of qualification, all education system, especially university studies is not adapted to the current needs of the labor market (FES, 2019: 45).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Lack of options available

One of the issues discussed with the young people interviewed were the plans and opportunities that awaited them after graduating from high school. From the data of the interviews it results that the young people are concerned about a significant lack of possibilities after finishing high school studies. "I had no alternative but to apply to pursue an university degree" - stated E. Sh, one 20-year-old student- during the interview.

According to the results of the interviews, the young people interviewed stated that the alternatives offered to them after finishing high school are mostly limited to: - Continuation of university studies or any vocational school or - Emigration. "After secondary school, girls either pursue a high education degree or stay with their parents until they get married, while boys are expected to emigrate," stated B.C., 19 years old, during the interview.

The young people interviewed stated that they would like to have more choices, and finding a job is one of them. "I did not want to go to high school after secondary school, I would have preferred to take my time to decide on the future. But who has the luxury for this. Our families often are full of economic issues, you have to do something once you finish secondary school. I had no other choice, to please my parents and somehow show I am doing something for my future at least...so here I am, continuing my studies. I would rather find a job until I was clearer about what I would do. But only working as a waiter was the alternative and that is paid poorly" said one of the students interviewed.

Youth employment opportunities are scarce and often the jobs offered generally give low payment, which rightly according to young people is not worth accepting. "Waiter, shop assistant, call centers in some cities, these are the opportunities that await us. Jobs that offer little pay and that do not help at all for the future or to get a profession at least. But often these are not even possible in many cities and villages of Albania " - said the interviewee L.S. during the interview. "We live in a country full of issues, poverty and corruption, what can a young man expect to do in these circumstances?!" - says one of the students of the Faculty of Economics.

4.2 We are wasting time, we will not even find a job when we finish our studies

In general, the biggest concern of young people pursuing higher education is employment, uncertainty associated with the future. Young people are worried about what awaits them after graduation: I am finishing my studies ... what then? Where will I find work?

One of the results of the interviews is the declining enthusiasm of young people about the results that education will bring in improving their future. Young people interviewed express concern about what awaits them after completing university studies. "I came to high school to get a profession and find a job when I finish it, but with what I see around me, with so many young graduates holding diplomas in drawers and wandering around for an opportunity, I feel like hopeless" - said the interviewee IM, a first year student in the Faculty of History.

When interviewees were asked what they expect after graduation, they say they expect to find a job. Many of them say that the reason for pursuing higher education is precisely to have more opportunities to find a job after graduation. "In this country it is difficult to find a job without a degree, they are so many young people and young women that have diplomas of bachelor and master's degree but again without a job. When they are not finding work, how would I find it without a degree?! I am hoping that after graduation I will be able to work in my profession. I hope to some extent that economics as a branch seems to offer more employment opportunities than many other branches " - said H.C., during the

interview.

This attitude of young people can be understood given the rising unemployment rates and low wages in the labor market, especially in the public sector. Although educated, young people do not have the opportunity to find work, but even if they do, their pay is low compared to the high cost of daily living. Also, this attitude of young people towards education can be understood more given that young people associate the importance of attending education with the possibility of finding a job. They express that they doubt that education will bring them employment, which is considered as the minimum result they are expected to receive from education, but also as the objective they aim to achieve with the completion of university studies.

4.3 Choosing an educational profile, often is simply one of the 10 branches to choose from.

Respondents say that many young people have randomly chosen their educational profile, or more precisely, the profile they are pursuing is often what they have been able to get. Few of them have had the chance to get enrolled in their first choice degree profile, many say that they are studying in a degree profile that is just one that was put to fill the 10 choice preference list. But even those who have preferred the profile they follow seem to be more influenced by others people in their choice, especially their parents. As a result, many young people have come to the auditorium not because they have a clear plan or because they love the profession they will have, but because they had no other alternative. This issue becomes even more worrying if we add to the fact that many young people have expressed that they are not graduating in the field they want, but in "what they could catch" as often expressed by the interviewed young people. According to the young people interviewed, few students were lucky enough to enroll in the branch they wanted. Although according to them, unemployment is a concern for all graduates of any kind of branch. However, there continues to be a preference for some profiles because they are considered that they have more chances for employment and maybe even for a better salary.

Thus, the data show that students studying at the Faculty of Economics are somewhat more optimistic than other students interviewed about finding a job after graduating. According to the interviewees, there continues to be a hierarchy of university profiles in terms of opportunities for a good job and a good salary, such as medicine or economics. "Some university profiles have more employment opportunities, some do not have at all, as is mine" - says a student of studying Geography - "I will finish it and will work in one of the call centers like many other young people" - she continues.

4.4 Dilemmas to stay or start life abroad

One of the topics discussed with young people during the interviews were their plans and concerns after graduation. Frequently during the interviews it was common to hear from the students expressions like: "Let's finish what we started once" or "Our plans are known, it is enough to see the surrounding environment and understand what plans you can make in this country". Young people interviewed said they are very concerned about the rising unemployment rate and corruption. Thus, among the issues stated, unemployment and lack of meritocracy, referring to the unequal opportunities offered to young people, were the most concerns between the interviewed youth. Respondents say that personal acquaintances are very important in finding a job or for career advancement. According to them, jobs or promotions, etc., are done mainly with the help of relatives and friends, or even through the influence of someone in power. The influence of political parties in finding a job or promoting someone without meritocracy is seen as a very worrying phenomenon for young people. Faced with these issues, young people are constantly faced with the dilemma - to stay or to leave?! From the data extracted from the interviews, it results that young people are looking for an opportunity to leave Albania after completing their studies. "So bad I did not apply to study to be a nurse, I would apply to migrate to Germany. With the subject I am studying I do not know if I will get a job somewhere" - stated a student of the second year studying History. "I applied for a US visa, and I was accepted in the first round, I hope the other procedures go well and I leave" - said a student of Economics. Many of the young people interviewed say that leaving here is one of the main alternatives after completing their studies. According to them, with rising unemployment, low wages, other issues related to many injustices that are present in Albanian society, the escape seems as an inevitable consequence for a better future. They say that their parents have also become more motivated towards them by supporting them in the initiatives taken to leave.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

As the survey data shows, what young people express is the concerns they have for their future, a kind of distrust that their education will bring improvement of their future, but, on the other hand, education is seen as one of the only alternatives offered to them. Unemployment is a complex social issue that is associated with a number of other social phenomena, which make the situation/position, especially of young people, even more disadvantaged. Young people, found in such a situation, where jobs are scarce and their skills or preparation does not help or facilitate to find a job, face the dilemma of staying or moving elsewhere for a better future.

Another phenomenon that results from the interviews is the fact young people more and more are considering pursuing higher education as the only alternative after secondary school graduation. As young people often jokingly say: when we finish secondary school, girls have two alternatives - to pursue higher education or to get married; while boys - to pursue higher education or to emigrate. Many young people say that higher education is simply the only opportunity offered to them after finishing secondary school. As a result, many young people have come to the auditorium not because they have a clear plan or because they love the profession they will have, but because they have no other alternative.

The interviews show that young people say they are looking for an opportunity to leave. Migration is a phenomenon with multifaceted, developmental, inhibitory and often contradictory consequences in all areas of social, economic, political and psycho-cultural activity (Dervishi, Z., 2003: 1-2). Migration in both its forms, internal or external, is the main factor of all socio-economic changes that have occurred in the Republic of Albania after 1990. As a result of difficult living conditions, high unemployment, the political unstable situation and marked differences between different regions of the country, migration, in both its forms, will continue to play an important role in the future (Doka, Dh., 2012; INSTAT, 2015 (a)).

From the data it is clear that unemployment is a serious problem for young people. The economic issues associated with the pronounced lack of jobs are the cause of many other issues that have made young people consider the homeland as a temporary alternative. Because of the power with which these problems strike and affect the lives and opportunities for young people, young people prefer to leave and it seems the provision of material goods is becoming the mainly impetus for young people nowadays. Emergency measures need to be taken to improve this situation, which can only be achieved through the commitment of all actors in society, starting from the individual to social groups, from government and civil bodies, from young people and other generations. Only the commitment and involvement of all actors will be able to bring about a change and improvement of a situation that is truly alarming to our entire society.

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