



Role of Education in Shaping Preparedness for Disasters in Albania

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Abstract

Education system is much affected by the challenges imposed by disasters. Disasters affect both demand and supply side of education. During a disaster event, the less developed communities are the ones who bear the highest costs of a damaged environment, and this affects also education provision. These impacts affect the quality of education and jeopardize the security of students and teachers involved in the process of teaching and learning. This article will focus on the importance of disaster risk communication and perception, in the context of implementing a complete disaster management cycle. In particular, attention will be paid to the impacts and role of education, as an important tool for risk communication, emphasized in both research and practice. The methodology the paper includes both desk research and primary data collection. The needs of implementing disaster risk studies in higher education institutions is thoroughly assessed. The past experience with interdisciplinary studies in the Balkan Region and in Albania is summarized. In-depth interviews are in addition conducted to support our study. Accordingly, conclusion on the needs to develop and integrate disaster studies in current curricula in Higher Education in Albania are elaborated.

Keywords: Education system, inter-disciplinary studies, integrate disaster studies, Balkan Region, Education in Albania

1. Introduction

As the world constantly faces different types of disasters and crises, it is becoming increasingly important to design and implement a complete disaster management cycle that addresses the stages before a disaster event occurs, not just the post-disaster phases. The way risk is communicated to the population and perceived influences the success of disaster risk management policies.

This article will focus on the importance of disaster risk communication and perception, in the context of implementing a complete disaster management cycle. Particular attention will be paid to the role of education, as an important tool for risk communication, emphasized in both research and practice. The needs of implementing disaster risk studies in higher education institutions is thoroughly assessed. Based on the results of the in-depth interviews conducted to support our study, conclusion on the needs to develop and integrate disaster studies in current curricula in Higher Education in Albania are drawn.

The article is organized as follows. The literature review offers a summary on studies on disaster communication and on the role of education in disaster field. Further, the stage of development of disaster risk education is presented, with a special focus on the progress of the Balkan area in this issue. The methodology and results are presented in the third part of the paper and followed by recommendations on the future path of development of higher education studies in the field of disaster risk.

2. Literature review

2.1 Risk Perception and Risk Communication

The process of selecting which of the risks should be treated or prevented by disaster managers is influenced not only by the consequences and the frequency of a risk but also by the acceptability of the risk. Risk should not be determined only by objective, quantitative criteria, as it is also a social construct, interpreted in different ways by different individuals (Young, 1998). Various studies have identified that one of the strongest drivers in supporting mitigation policies and a willingness to take action to prevent and treat risk is the perception that the individuals have about it.

Personal factors that dictate whether a risk would be considered "acceptable" reflect the perception of risk. Perception of risk relates to the interpretation or meaning that the individual gives to various threats that may cause loss of life or property. Perception varies depending on the type of risk (e.g., how frequent and severe is the potential harm), the personality of the individual, the political-economic context of the country and the social circle (Renn, 2008). When risk is taken voluntarily, e.g. when driving fast or smoking, it is perceived as less harmful. Meanwhile, natural disasters such as earthquakes or epidemics are perceived as more threatening as they are imposed by external forces and as a result are uncontrollable not only by individuals but also by governments or health systems. Also, knowledge about a certain risk influences public perceptions. Unknown risks, involuntary, and with consequent consequences, are considered more life-threatening than common causes (Slovic, 1992).

Personal factors have been largely addressed by literature. They include factors such as: age, gender, educational level, profession, personal disaster experience, etc. Interesting findings have been produced by international literature in relation to these factors. It is common understanding for example that women, perceive a higher level of risk. Miceli (2008) have confirmed this in their research, while studying the impact of age and gender on disaster risk perception. They state that women are less tolerant towards the risk of natural disasters than men, while older ages are more tolerant. Armas (2007) shows that grown-ups and individuals with higher levels of education are less tolerant of natural risk, while finding that income was not statistically significant in his study. Income, on the other hand, has been found to affect disaster risk tolerance in Baan & Klijn (2004) study. They have found that the increase in family income reduces the tolerance of individuals to natural risk.

In their article "Risk Assessment", the well-known risk perception experts Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff and Sarah Lichtenstein state that "People respond to the risks they perceive" (Slovic et al., 1979). The ways in which risk is presented or reported greatly influence the way people perceive risk. Public behavior and consequently the dynamics of disaster management are profoundly influenced by information communicated by authorities (governments, experts, etc.) (Fischhoff et al., 1997; Lundgren & McMakin, 1998). Furthermore, authors (Siegrist & Cvetkovich, 2000; Viklund, 2003; Welch et al., 2005) have confirmed that increasing trust in governing authorities leads to a lower level of individuals' perception of risk regarding the complexity and uncertainty of a situation and enables individuals to adapt to a risk faced and to respond to risk more rationally.

Research in the field of risk perception has proven that media, as an important source of information, plays an essential role in risk perception. With the purpose of explaining the process of how a hazardous event has direct and indirect societal impact, it was developed social amplification of risk framework (SARF) in 1988 (Kasperson et al., 1988). The framework includes a number of steps such as the concrete physical event and its recognition, the list of the individuals or groups who define the actual components of the risk to be encoded and explained (Renn et al., 1992). On the basis of these detailed descriptions the messages are compiled and conveyed to others who become "amplification stations" that spread or amplify the message through various communication channels. From the perspective of social amplification of risk (Kasperson et al., 1988), individuals belong to the amplification station category, which decodes countless signals in risk information according to their subjective judgment about the risk. In addition, media, also can be considered as one major amplification station, which plays a crucial role in people's cognition building (Kasperson et al., 1988). On the one hand amplification is the process by which the analysts consider the risk unlikely to occur, however, it has major secondary consequences. On the other hand, if no sufficient public concern and attention is given to a serious risk then attenuation occurs. Information communicated from a trusted source with a high credibility lowers the perceived level of risk (Renn & Levine, 1991). Emotions, stigma, feeling, risk information transmitted from media are significant predictors of perceived risk. We judge risks as higher when we feel negative about an activity, but we judge risks as lower when we feel positive about it. Moreover, the information presented in a positive manner, without being alarmed and if accompanied by elements that can reduce anxiety will affect the reduction of risk perception by individuals. Whereas

under the conditions when information is presented in a negative manner, with stigma, elements that reduce personal beliefs will affect the increase of risk perception by amplifying the amount of risk by individuals (Slovic et al., 2005).

Many researchers are more focused now on reducing risk and creating a safety culture by pursuing a multilateral approach involving not only technical experts but also the wider community and education institutions. All the above-mentioned actors need to interact to identify risks first and then develop action plans to respond to the risks identified. Education institutions play their role in this relationship in understanding the educational “messages” that future generations will need to adopt to form their own safety culture. The right tools must then be found to communicate these messages and meet the needs of the general public.

3. Education role in DRM

Education system is much affected by the challenges imposed by disasters. Disasters affect both demand and supply side of education. During a disaster event, the less developed communities are the ones who bear the highest costs of a damaged environment (Gurenko & Lester, 2004), and this affects also education provision. These impacts affect the quality of education and jeopardize the security of students and teachers involved in the process of teaching and learning. Disasters can damage or destroy school facilities and educational systems, threatening the physical safety and psychological well-being of communities. Migration of population due to climate threats, also causes the interruption of education supply. Education vulnerability is further fostered by the economic impacts of disasters, which reduce school enrolment, as children are kept out of school to help their families cope with disaster consequences (Kopnina, 2012; Anderson, 2012; Hamilton, 2011; Peek, 2008).

Despite being threatened by disaster risk, the education sector involve many adaptive capacities. More educated citizens are believed to be better prepared to face a disaster event (Russell et al., 1995; Liu et al., 1996; Lindell & Perry, 2000). In addition, disaster-related education can further enhance personal preparedness, contributing to the mitigation of disaster risks (Muttarak & Pothisiri, 2013).

Today education system is challenged by the need to address complex development problems globally. This has paved the way for development of new forms of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary programs **Invalid source specified..** Promoting disaster risk knowledge in higher education institution is essential for strengthening the safety culture of the population. In addition, being of interdisciplinary nature, disaster risk education contributes to a high range of disciplines like agriculture, economy, engineering, environmental studies, urban studies, etc. There are many ways how sustainable development issues related to disaster risk management can be mainstreamed into education system. Education for Sustainable Development is a comprehensive and multidisciplinary tool that includes not only relevant content knowledge on disasters, climate change and other sustainability topics, but also focuses on the capacity of schools and education systems to become more resilient, sustainable and green (Kopnina, 2012; Anderson, 2012; Hamilton, 2011). A great deal of literature has recognized the role of higher education institutions in developing and supplying disaster knowledge, as well as supporting policy at all scales (Holloway, 2014). This happens in all the countries coping with disasters, but especially developing ones, as there the role of HEIs is particularly necessary to promote public involvement in reaching national development goals (Koehn, 2013). HEIs throughout the world have progressed creating DRR course modules in interdisciplinary settings, such as in science (like geology), humanities (like geography), urban planning, engineering, economics, and so on (Shaw, 2020). Higher education has long played a crucial role in supporting policies and programs for disaster risk reduction though the management of specialized data bases, dedicated natural hazards research centres and training of tomorrow's leaders, who can give conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions to the field of DRR (Holloway, 2014).

Promotion of education in the field of disaster risk reduction has been emphasized in several international frameworks:

- The third priority of the Hyogo Framework for Action acknowledges in particular the role of knowledge, innovation and education to reinforce resilience and the safety culture of a society (UNISDR, 2005);
- The first priority of the Sendai Framework Action Plan “Understanding disaster risk” emphasizes the need to integrate education, science, and technology as an available mechanism to facilitate priority actions (UNDRR, 2015)
- Education is central to reorient efforts towards a new path for achieving sustainability, within the aims of the SDG goals (UN, 2015a)
- Promoting action in education for climate change and disaster risk reduction is also required in the framework of Paris Agreement (Articles 11 and 12), which affirms the importance of education, training, public awareness,

public participation, public access to information and cooperation at all levels on the matters addressed in it (UNFCCC, 2016).

Many researchers are now focusing more and more on the ability of children and youth to affect disaster policies, and resilience building. Especially their role in implementing risk communication, education, advocacy, and risk reduction activities is being recognized (Anderson, 2005; Peek, 2008; Pfefferbaum et al., 2018). In this regard, while acknowledging the top-down approach of disaster risk communication, which requires scientist and experts to maintain the role of informants to the general public, Mitchell et al. (2008) studied the role of children and youth as resources or receivers of disaster management information. Their case study research on the role of children during a time of crisis in El Salvador and New Orleans, though not conclusive, contended that informed children and youth could serve as highly trusted and politically neutral resources influencing the understanding on risks and challenging traditional beliefs (Mitchell et al., 2008). The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, emphasizing the high impact that disaster have on children, has also advocated their active participation in disaster risk reduction activities (UNISDR, 2011). Under these observations, approaching children and youth through education programs designated to enrich their understanding on sustainable development issues related to disaster risk management becomes crucial (Peek, 2008).

Sustainability education offers many opportunities, but in the same time poses many challenges. Teaching sustainability involves the interdisciplinary nature of the problems at stake. The challenging nature of the field implies not only focusing on course content, but also to new ways of teaching that content. Pedagogy in sustainability field is therefore a complex issue. Usually, instructors involved in sustainability teaching are required to work outside their own areas of expertise. They need to bring new content and methodologies to the process of teaching, in order to promote critical thinking and a problem-solving approach to students. Moreover, in order to contribute to coping with the challenges of climate change, disaster risk management and sustainable development, it is indispensable to establish interfaculty and interdisciplinary collaboration (Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016; Holloway, 2014, Azeiteiro, 2015) which will also enable the modernization of Higher Education. The lack of flexibility of classes and courses, language and psychosocial factors, economic factors, and rigid university programs and regulations are further barriers to mainstreaming sustainability into current curricula (Gilbert, 2005; Holloway, 2014).

4. Sustainability Education in the World, Europe and in the Western Balkans

Educational institutions can make indirect contribution to public health and safety through developing their curricula. However, this mission has only to a limited extent been carried over to higher education. A review of programs of studies conducted with an EU project¹ shows that over 107 risk education programs (including programs dealing with business risk and to financial risk management) are offered in EU and UK (K-force, 2017). In many cases these programs are of interdisciplinary nature, where the technical elements of the field are integrated with economics, risk assessment, finance and insurance issues. Holloway (2014) has reviewed the academic offerings in the field of DRM in many developed and developing countries and found around 100 masters-level programmes offered in 48 countries that involve resilience, disaster reduction, or disaster risk. Two University partnerships established in Africa and Asia, respectively Periperi U and the AUEDM, have integrated disaster risk concepts and practice into higher education curricula in order to promote human and institutional development in the disaster risk field (Shaw, et. al, 2011 and Holloway, 2014). Singh (2007) evaluates India education and technical training from elementary to higher education curricula as essential components of disaster mitigation. Pal et al., (2019) make observation on the considerable progress in incorporating sustainability in higher education within the Asian region. They further recommend prioritizing in HEIs curriculum, among other topics, disaster economics, risk insurance, and business risk management. They also recognize the need for short term and professional courses of interdisciplinary nature in the HEIs educational framework, in order to promote the chances for effective community outreach and greater awareness (Pal et al., 2019). Shaw (2020) mentions the efforts of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities in relation to creating a safety culture. A multi-hazard program including open campus activities has served to the promotion of campus safety initiatives and has approached governance support in terms of facilities and infrastructures on campus, as well as educational continuity and post-traumatic stress disorder

¹ *The Knowledge of a Resilient Society Project is a project financed by the EU through the Erasmus + program. Its aim is to improve regional resilience to hazards and capability for regional cooperation in risk prevention and response and to ensure national professional resources and regional capacities in order to build regional-based disaster preparedness and a culture of safety and resilience at all levels according to EU Integration Strategies and National relevant strategies. The authors of this article have been part the consortium of the project and have contributed to the achievement of project goals. Full description, goals and results of the project are located at the project webpage: <http://www.kforce.gradjevinans.net/>*

support for students in the aftermath of disasters (Shaw, 2020).

Although the role of education in addressing these challenges is being increasingly established, the ability of education to contribute to adaptation and mitigation measures is yet a way to go, especially in the Balkan region. Western Balkan countries share a similar political context, coming from a communist past, which, to various extents, continues to affect their higher education systems. The implementation of Sustainable Development Education in Balkan countries is still a way to go. With the exception of Greece, few countries have operationalized the inclusion of topics related to disaster risk management, climate change adaptation, energy markets, sustainability governance, etc. Cultural inflexibility, a traditional education system, and a generally restricted labour market are barriers for implementing such requirements in higher education. Few efforts to implement modernized sustainability education in the region were observed, as well as few attempts to make university services more efficient, and more sustainable. However, in post-communist era (1990 to the present) higher education curricula have been heavily revised to incorporate the principles of the Bologna Process. In addition, entirely new courses have been devised. The European Union has supported the higher education sector in the region through a broad range of projects and financing schemes, and most countries have reciprocated by embracing western education practices, such as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches. While bachelor programs in WB tend to be more traditional in terms of content and focus, postgraduate programs are making a concerted effort to diversify their content. The creation of master programs that straddle across faculties is evidence of that reflecting the needs of the increasingly challenging future described above (Pojani & Pojani, 2019). Most of these programs are offered by polytechnic universities, while an interfaculty collaboration is necessary. In 2016, an EU funded project entitled Knowledge for a resilient Society (K-Force)², contributed to building a sustainable educational foundation in the field of Disaster Risk Management and Fire Safety Engineering in the Western Balkans. In 2018, six new programs in the field of Disaster Risk Management were implemented at Partner Universities in the Balkan countries (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania). The project was developed through the collaboration of EU academic partners. A summary of the programs offered in the countries of the region is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Programs of study in the field of disaster risk management in Western Balkans

Country	Program	Aim	HEI
Serbia	Master programme "Disaster Risk Management and Fire safety"	The purpose of the study programme is the education of students of the profession of Master in Disaster Risk Management and Fire Safety in accordance with the needs of society.	Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad
	Master programme "Emergency Management"	The primary aim of the study programme is to enable students to apply scientific and professional achievements in solving the problems of safety of humans and natural and material wealth, and in developing emergency management systems.	Faculty of Occupational Safety, University of Niš
North Macedonia	Master in Earthquake Engineering	The Earthquake Engineering major enables education of candidates in the domain of modern earthquake engineering. The candidates are trained in application of new, most recent methods of design and construction of seismically safe structures.	University Ss. Cyril & Methodius, Skopje Institute of Earthquake Engineering and Engineering Seismology
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Master in Disaster Risk Management and Fire Safety	The program's goals are to further train professionals in Disaster Risk Management and Fire Safety in Civil Engineering.	University of Tuzla
Albania	Master of Science in Risk Management	This Master Program aims at combining three approaches to risk management: enterprise risk management; Financial risk management; and disaster risk management.	Faculty of Economy, University of Tirana
	Professional Master Disaster Risk Management and Fire Safety in Civil	The program's goals are to further train professionals in Disaster Risk Management and Fire Safety in Civil Engineering who are able to work effectively in teams across a large range	Epoka University

² More on the project can be found at the project webpage: <http://www.kforce.gradjevinans.net/>

Engineering	of scales and with a well-developed knowledge.
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Source: K-force Project Webpage and The Authors

5. Methodology

5.1 Background

The Albanian population has experienced many human or natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, and even earthquakes. Their effect has been really devastating to the population, the Albanian economy and the country's development even as a result of the lack of disaster insurance (WB, 2014). According to the report of the Ministry of Local Government and Decentralization and UNDP (2003), Albania has a high exposure to natural disasters. The causes of natural disasters are different: Natural causes (geological, hydrological, atmospheric, biophysical); 2) Anthropogenic causes (floods caused by dams break, intentional fires, 3) Ecological causes. Moreover, as the risk of climate change increases, it is expected that the frequency of extreme weather events will increase significantly (UNDP, 2009). Available data shows that the risk level is increasing and is comparatively higher in Albania than in neighboring countries. The four main dangers affecting Albania are earthquakes, floods, forest fires and snowstorms.

The most devastating disaster of the last decades was registered in 2019, when a devastating earthquake, with a magnitude of 6.3 on the Richter scale at a depth of 38 km, hit the country (Albanian Institute of Geophysics, 2019). Because of the disaster, 202,291 people were affected in the country, 47,263 directly, and 155,029 indirectly. Public reports after the event assessed the aftermath consequences. 51 fatalities were caused by the earthquake and at least 913 people injuries. Moreover, up to 17,000 people were displaced due to the loss of their homes. The earthquake was described as the strongest to hit Albania in 30 years. It caused extensive damage in 11 municipalities, including the two most populous, urbanized and developed municipalities (Tirana and Durrës). Damages were reported to 321 educational institutions in the 11 affected municipalities, representing 24% of all educational establishments. Losses from the event are estimated at 8.76 million EUR (1.08 billion ALL) (Inter-ministerial Committee for Civil Emergencies, February 2020).

In Albania, disaster risk reduction and disaster management need to be treated as a matter of priority, particularly in the light of the severe earthquake of 2019. This earthquake testified the lack of safety culture in society in general and in particular that there was a need; for professionals, experts, competent to operate in prevention, reaction and recovery phases of the catastrophic events and solve interdisciplinary problems in the field of DRM.

Until 2018, there were no university programmes (neither master's nor bachelor's degree) focused on disaster risk management in Albania. Programs related to the field of Environmental Engineering and Earthquake Engineering can be mentioned to emphasize their content and their partial relevance to the field of disaster risk management. Meanwhile in 2018, two programs of studies in the field of disaster risk management were implemented in Albania under the European Community funded Erasmus + program. The program of study Master of Science in Risk Management offered at the University of Tirana continues for the third consecutive year, and includes topics related indirectly and directly to sustainability, such as: disaster risk management, climate change adaptation, financial resilience toward hazards, disaster risk modeling, disaster risk evaluation, etc. This program of study is the only program in the country that includes a course on Climate Change Adaptation. However, despite its importance, this program of study involves only 30 students each year.

6. Data and Method

Our research focuses on the assessment of the need for disaster risk education in Albania. It is supported by thorough desk research on the issue, including the review of several programs of studies in the field of risk management, disaster risk management, climate science, etc. We further analyzed the history of the country in relation to disasters and the impact of these events on the economic and social framework of the country. This process helped us identify the problems of the way response after a disaster is organized and the reasons for the lack of capacities in this regard.

In addition, during the period March-April 2017, as a part for market research, several in-depth interviews were conducted with experts of the area, professionals working in DRM, and representatives of government institutions in charge of civil protection. The outcome of this process has been a deeper understanding of the problems Albania faces in the institutional and legal framework of civil emergencies and education needs in the DRM field. The interviews results were indispensable in supporting our conclusions of the need for further developing education in the field of disaster risk in Albania, and particularly emphasized the needs of the market for professionals educated in the field.

7. Findings: Education requirements in the field of disaster risk management in Albania

The opinions gathered from the interviews were divided into two groups. The first were those who embraced the idea of creating a master's program in the field of DRM. This group mainly consisted of those working in research institutions or involved in academic research in this field. On the other hand, there was more skepticism by representatives of government institutions, who considered the consolidation of the legal and institutional framework in the field of DRM as a priority, rather than education. They emphasized that the creation and consolidation of the institutional framework and legislation is a prerequisite for the future employment of students enrolled in such programs. More specifically, the main ideas consulted are summarized below:

- Interview with General Directorate of Civil Emergencies in Albania – The discussions were focused mainly on the legal and institutional framework of disaster risk management. Participants in this interview were the most skeptical regarding the education programs especially because their focus was on the need of consolidation of legislation and institutions in the field as a prerequisite for developing a labor market for future professionals in the field.
- Interview with Ministry of Agriculture and Water Administration, General Inspectorate of Water, and Municipality of Tirana - The outcome of these interviews was very good, and the idea of a new master programs in the field of disaster risk management was embraced by the participants. The discussions were oriented towards the lack of expertise in the current labor market in relation to disaster risk field and the need to consolidate education in this regard.
- Interview with UNDP Climate change Program in Albania, Institute of Water research in Albania, IBECA project in Albania. In these cases, these organisations presented very positive attitude towards the development of new programs of studies in the field of disaster risk. They emphasized that for too long Albania has been supported by international experts in this field, and it is very important to create local experts who need to acquire in depth knowledge from their studies, not only during work trainings.
- Interview with Albanian Financial Supervisory Authority representatives - The Authority is in charge or supervision of Insurance market in Albania, therefore their opinion and suggestions were very important in terms of market needs in economics of DRR. They regarded as very important the initiation of study programs in the field of risk management in general. The development a master program in Risk Management at the University of Tirana was very much elaborated during this interview.

Importantly, all interviewees emphasized that while a need for a more diversified workforce (in terms of education) is evident, the ability of the labour market to absorb graduates of such innovative programs of study is doubtful. The recent earthquake experience by Albania in 2019 testified the necessity for a larger number of experts in the field of Disaster Risk Management. More attention should be address to awareness raising of future generation to acquire knowledge in the field of Disaster Risk Management as a mean that will provide the base for building a resilient society. Reality has proven that economic development is affected by disasters. Under such circumstances, is significant to build capacities with interdisciplinary and interfaculty knowledge, able to create sustainable financial plans for disaster preparedness and preventive measures, according to national and regional economy recourses.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

In Albania, disaster risk management should be treated as primary issues, especially in light of the severe earthquake of 2019. This earthquake proved the lack of security culture in society in general and in particular the need for professionals, experts, competent to operate in the stages of prevention, response and recovery of disaster events and the resolution of interdisciplinary problems in the field of Disaster Risk Management. More attention should be paid to raising the awareness of the next generation to gain knowledge in the field of Disaster Risk Management as a tool that will provide the basis for building a resilient society.

In addition to developments and capacity building in the field of higher education, researchers in the field have assessed that the risks of disasters that may occur in the future must necessarily be included in the national economic plans and rescue plans of the country. Reality has proven that economic development is affected by disasters. In such circumstances, it is important to build capacities with interdisciplinary knowledge and cooperation between faculties, capable of creating sustainable financial plans for the preparation and taking preventive measures against disasters, according to national and regional economy sources. Policies that encourage the development of formal education can

be beneficial in reducing vulnerability and mitigating disaster impacts.

To address these challenges, and to guide the way toward sustainability in higher education system, international cooperation and assistance is essential. The experience of EU countries in sustainability field, can be a driver in achieving sustainability goals in higher education in the Balkan Region. Joint initiatives, bringing together higher education institutions from EU and the Balkans, fostering collaboration and networking in the region and beyond, address both the integration goals of each country and serve the needs of joint, integrated, common action for sustainability.

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