The BALKANETUP: Fostering Innovation and Collaboration in Higher Education Pedagogy in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) must adapt to a dynamic socio-economic and cultural landscape by aligning teaching practices with labor market demands and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. A student-centered teaching model, emphasizing shared responsibility and collaboration, is critical to equipping graduates with skills for an evolving workforce. This necessitates transforming academics into lifelong learners with strong pedagogical competencies. Faculty development, integration of innovative technologies, and quality assurance are essential for modernizing University Pedagogy and preparing students for societal challenges. Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) play a pivotal role in supporting this transformation by cultivating active, student-centered learning environments. In the Western Balkans, the MAGNET project aims to enhance higher education by establishing CTLs and fostering the BALKANETUP network. These initiatives address challenges in university teaching, promoting pedagogical innovation and regional collaboration. The BALKANETUP network connects HEIs, CTLs, scholars, and experts to advance teaching practices through shared resources, training, and research. By leveraging digital tools and fostering professional development, it supports educators in integrating modern techniques into their teaching. Ensuring its sustainability relies on expanding membership, forming partnerships, and maintaining a commitment to continuous improvement, positioning the BALKANETUP as a key driver of educational innovation in the region.

Keywords
Higher education institutions, student-centered teaching, faculty development, centers for teaching and learning, BALKANETUP network.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 50 years, socio-economic and cultural changes have significantly impacted employment, with a continuous rise in the demand for knowledge and interpersonal skills. Graduates now enter a job market characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and interdisciplinary collaboration. As a result, attention to teaching and learning in higher education institutions has gained importance, particularly in connection with faculty development. This shift aligns with a strong European policy emphasis on enhancing learning and teaching in HEIs (European Commission, 2012; EUA, 2019a, 2019b).

University education must prepare students for a dynamic, ever-changing working environment by equipping them with the skills, knowledge, values, and attributes necessary for success. Universities worldwide are exploring ways to connect their academic programs and scientific preparation of students with societal and economic needs. This is a challenging task, requiring HEIs to interpret and respond pedagogically to the evolving demands of the modern workplace (Karalis, Kedraka & Botsoglou, 2020).

A student-centered teaching model has been proposed as an effective approach for university education. This method emphasizes dialogical discussion and shifts the responsibility for learning from individuals to a collaborative and communicative process. By promoting collaboration and participatory knowledge construction, this model encourages shared responsibility between teachers and students, fostering effective learning, teamwork, and accountability (Carnell, 2007).

Academics play a critical role in addressing these challenges. To fulfill this role, they must transform from educators to lifelong learners. As adult learners with strong scientific backgrounds and expertise in knowledge transmission, academics possess the foundation to adapt and grow. However, beyond their scientific and research expertise, they need effective pedagogical skills to deliver the desired learning outcomes. This involves engaging not only with students but also with policymakers, scholars, experts, and stakeholders, thereby forming dynamic learning communities.

The new paradigms in higher education teaching and learning require continuous development in pedagogy (Wells & Edwards, 2013), the integration of technologies, and the adoption of assessment models aligned with student-centered learning. These paradigms also call for innovative learning platforms and methods to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. Quality assurance has emerged as a crucial factor in improving teaching and learning. Accreditation processes have placed pressure on many HEIs to

enhance their teaching delivery to meet institutional criteria (Kaltsidis et al., 2021; Karalis, Kedraka & Botsoglou, 2020). Societal and economic shifts demand that universities adopt flexible and up-to-date methods to make lifelong learning a reality for academia (Raikou & Karalis, 2011).

University Pedagogy is recognized as a multidimensional process that promotes effective teaching practices and strategies (Kedraka & Rotidi, 2017). Providing training and support for academics within university settings encourages active student learning and shifts HEIs' strategic focus toward quality assurance.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 University Pedagogy, Adult Education, and Lifelong Learning

University Pedagogy is an emerging field encompassing theory, practice, research, and application. It focuses on the professional training of university teachers in pedagogy and teaching methodology. The term University Pedagogy refers to the academic dimension of pedagogy. It characterizes, on the one hand, various scientific theories and studies concerning educational and influencing processes at the individual, group, community, and societal levels in diverse environments. On the other hand, it pertains to specific teaching practices and approaches employed by teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning processes as part of their professional mission, as highlighted by Gougoulakis and Oikonomou (2014). Their study underscored the necessity of pedagogical training for both the permanent teaching staff of HEIs in Greece and their collaborators, such as doctoral candidates, scientific associates, and others who contribute to university teaching.

Kedraka and Dimassi (2016) addressed a similar issue, emphasizing the significance of university teaching not only for the personal and professional development of students but also for shaping societal developmental conditions. They noted that most faculty members lack familiarity with teaching methods, either due to a lack of motivation or because they prioritize research as being more critical to their academic careers.

In practice, University Pedagogy seeks to answer the question: *What knowledge, skills, and abilities does a university teacher need to effectively help students learn and transition into adulthood?* Clearly, university teachers must possess professional competencies related to their specialized scientific knowledge as well as theoretical and

epistemological models and conceptual tools. These are essential for studying phenomena within their research field, designing and conducting experiments, collecting and analyzing data, and describing, understanding, and explaining phenomena (Kaltsidis, Orfanidou, Kedraka, & Karalis, 2021). Equally important, however, is the ability of university teachers to act as *educational engineers*, deeply understanding the multidimensional nature of learning processes (Kokkos, 2016). They must design and deliver courses that combine active learning with the transmission of scientific knowledge, skills, and academic ethics (Kedraka, 2016).

Lifelong Learning has emerged as a key issue in education policy, with the understanding that learning can and should be a lifelong endeavor (Illeris, 2002). Adult learning encompasses a range of formal and informal learning activities - both general and vocational - undertaken by adults after completing initial education and training. People need to update their knowledge, skills, and competencies to bridge the gap between their education and the demands of a rapidly evolving labor market. Adults engage in learning at a mature stage of life for various reasons, primarily to enhance employment prospects, achieve personal or professional growth, and develop transferable skills such as critical thinking. Additionally, adult learning contributes to social cohesion and promotes active citizenship while enhancing the competitiveness of businesses and economies.

Consequently, adult education is expanding rapidly in Greece and worldwide due to increasing interest from governments, researchers, and individuals in lifelong education and training. This interest addresses the educational needs of adults across all ages through dialogue, information, training, and support activities. Adult education focuses on individuals seeking to continue education or training later in life (Goulas, 2006) and is now recognized as a distinct and compelling field of scientific research. The ultimate purpose of adult education is to empower individuals to realize their potential, becoming more autonomous, socially responsible, and self-reliant through learning processes. These processes enable them to make informed choices and develop as critical thinkers (Basseches, 1984) within their social context (Mezirow, 2000).

Adults tend to pursue learning that aligns with their interests and priorities, choosing educational experiences that they find meaningful. They avoid learning that lacks perceived significance or relevance. This selective approach stems from their experiences, needs, and interests (Mezirow, 2000). Notably, certain theories of adult education, particularly those emphasizing transformative learning and fostering critical

reflection, provide valuable insights for linking the demand for soft skills with the specific needs of higher education.

Adult learning is a focus of the European Education Area for 2021–2030. The New European Agenda for Adult Learning envisions the development of adult learning across five priority areas by 2030:

- Governance of adult learning: Emphasizing comprehensive national strategies and stakeholder partnerships

- Supply and participation in lifelong learning opportunities: Ensuring sustainable funding

- Accessibility and flexibility: Adapting education to the needs of adults

- Quality, equity, inclusion, and success in adult learning: Highlighting professional development for educators, mobility for both learners and staff, quality assurance, and support for disadvantaged groups

- Green and digital transitions and related skill requirements

However, adult learning must extend beyond developing work-related skills. It is equally crucial to encourage the general population to participate actively in lifelong learning activities. Adult learning should integrate with all types and levels of education and training, including higher education, through flexible formal, non-formal, and informal pathways (EEA, 2021).

2.2 The Role of Centers for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Institutions

Asimakopoulos, Karalis, and Kedraka (2021) discuss the history and role of CTLs. They highlight that these relatively recent support structures, operating within HEIs, first emerged in the latter half of the 20th century but have experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades. Given the diversity and particularities of HEIs worldwide, there are significant differences in the mission, functions, organizational structures, and naming of these centers (Hurtado & Sork, 2015). Commonly referred to as *Centers for Teaching and Learning* (CTLs) or *Centers for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning* (CETLs), their titles sometimes incorporate terms such as "excellence," "innovation," "development," "promotion," "advancement," or "support."

The primary role of CTLs is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning within HEIs. Academics are considered the principal and "most important learning resource" (EAQAHE, 2005:17) available to students, making the professionalization of higher

education teaching a key focus (European Commission, 2013; Pleschová et al., 2012). CTLs play a pivotal role in promoting active learning methods and fostering a student-centered culture, which has flourished within these academic communities.

CTL training programs often emphasize sharing best practices, experiences, and addressing the challenges faced by academic staff. A key focus is on equipping faculty with the skills to facilitate student learning effectively, particularly in digital and distance learning environments—a need that became even more pronounced following the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

3. The case of the BALKNETUP

3.1 The Western Balkans' Educational Landscape and the Role of the MAGNET Project

In the turbulent region of the Western Balkans, countries are striving to establish robust public administration systems that reflect their histories, mixed cultural and political backgrounds, and a European orientation. This transition brings opportunities for reform and adaptation. Higher education systems in the region are similarly navigating modern challenges and demands in their pursuit of progress and relevance in a new era.

In response to these concerns, the 36-month MAGNET project *Managerial and Governance Enhancement through Teaching in the Western Balkans* was launched within the framework of the ERASMUS+ CBHE initiative. Coordinated by the Democritus University of Thrace, MAGNET commenced in December 2022 and comprises a partnership of 12 universities across eight Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The project aims to enhance the quality of university teaching through two primary actions: establishing and/or upgrading Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs), which are critical pillars in implementing the European Higher Education Area and the launching of the BALKANETUP, an online community among academics to promote and enhance networking on issues regarding University Pedagogy.

A survey conducted under the project, titled *Analysis & Master-Plan to Address the Needs & Wants of Higher Education Pedagogy in the Western Balkans* (MAGNET, 2023), revealed that, despite the absence of national policies on teaching and learning in higher education, 7 out of the 8 participating HEIs have independently developed institutional teaching and learning strategies. These institutions have also implemented

mechanisms and tools to improve the quality of education. Faced with diminishing resources and increasing competition, the challenges for universities in the Western Balkans are considerable. Nevertheless, HEIs are leveraging their autonomy to foster quality teaching and improve student learning outcomes.

According to the national reports of participating countries, the key obstacles to enhancing teaching and learning policies include:

- Limited financial and human resources

- A lack of robust and stable quality assurance systems

- Reduced interest among teaching staff in professional development

- Language barriers, a significant challenge in the Western Balkans

- Insufficient access to technology

- Limited opportunities for collaboration among HEIs within the broader European area

The MAGNET project aims to address these challenges by promoting awareness of quality teaching through workshops, seminars, and lectures. Its goal is to engage key stakeholders in each participating HEI, emphasizing the importance of teaching and learning as core institutional missions. It advocates for teaching and learning practices that prioritize student success. Central to this mission is the establishment of CTLs within HEIs across the Western Balkans. Although CTLs are not formal quality assurance structures, they seem to play a vital role in reviewing learning outcomes, curriculum mapping, and curriculum development. Moreover, CTLs support ongoing faculty development by providing a formal platform for sharing training, experiences and discussions on teaching and learning practices valued by academics.

Different faculty groups require tailored professional development to meet their specific needs. For instance, newly recruited faculty may benefit from initial training, either before starting their teaching responsibilities or during their first year. Conversely, full-time faculty may require support to adapt to changing workloads and the integration of emerging technologies into their teaching practices (Orfanidou, Kaltsidis, Karalis, & Kedraka, 2021). A notable best practice introduced by MAGNET is the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on University Pedagogy and related topics. These MOOCs, launched across the academic communities of MAGNET's partner HEIs, offer an innovative tool for the Western Balkans' higher education systems. By utilizing open learning platforms, the MOOCs enable overburdened university educators to refresh

their pedagogical knowledge and skills while gaining access to professional learning resources centered on technology. The delivery of MOOCs provides faculty members with a sustainable and scaffolded approach to keeping pace with continuous technological advancements.

Another significant initiative of the MAGNET project is the establishment of the Balkan Network for University Education (BALKANETUP). This network aims to foster synergies, share best practices, and establish joint research initiatives to enhance policies and practices for the development of university education in the Western Balkans -and internationally.

3.2 The BALKANETUP network

The BALKANETUP (https://magnet-project.eu/balkanetup/mission) is a collaborative network that brings together HEIs, CTLs, scholars, academic staff, higher and adult education experts, and organizations working in University Pedagogy, Adult Education, and Lifelong Learning. Its focus lies in enhancing teaching and learning within higher education across the Western Balkans. The initiative's mission is to strengthen relationships among its members to enable the exchange of effective teaching practices. This includes supporting the adoption of contemporary, evidence-based, competency-oriented, and student-centered teaching strategies within HEIs to improve educational outcomes.

The BALKANETUP aims to create a supportive environment where members can share knowledge, experiences, and best practices, fostering collaboration that enhances both individual and collective professional development. By encouraging cooperation among educators, the network seeks to promote academic staff development using sustainable and practical actions that address both general and discipline-specific needs across scientific domains. These actions are designed to improve pedagogical skills, encourage innovation and creativity in teaching methodologies, and provide resources to help educators address the challenges they face in their roles. The BALKANETUP also aims at facilitating ongoing opportunities for professional training and advocates for a culture of continuous learning and improvement among academic staff. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of higher education and the role of academics in shaping the future, seeking to enhance their contributions to regional development. Through these efforts, the BALKANETUP aspires to strengthen teaching and learning practices, while

building a cohesive academic community that supports the evolving demands of higher education in the region.

3.2.1 Objectives and Goals

The BALKANETUP is structured to address key objectives, including facilitating collaboration among academic staff, supporting continuous professional development, encouraging the adoption of innovative teaching methodologies, and providing assistance to educators in overcoming challenges associated with their teaching roles. A significant focus of the network is the transfer of knowledge related to establishing CTLs, the development of educational materials, and the promotion of partnerships among academics, experts, stakeholders, and organizations. These activities collectively aim to strengthen pedagogical practices and foster a contemporary teaching culture in the region.

To support these objectives, the BALKANETUP organizes various educational activities tailored to the needs of academic staff. These include conferences, seminars, webinars, workshops, and counseling sessions, all of which focus on topics related to higher education pedagogy. The network also undertakes research, disseminates findings, and shares examples of effective practices and teaching materials applicable to a range of disciplines. By facilitating access to these resources and fostering knowledge exchange, the network seeks to provide practical support to educators, enabling them to enhance their pedagogical skills and adapt to the evolving needs of higher education.

3.2.2 Membership and networking

The network is open to a broad and free-of-costs membership, including HEIs, organizations engaged in lifelong learning, and individuals with an interest in higher education pedagogy. Membership is categorized into three types: institutional membership, for HEIs and organizations supporting innovative teaching and learning practices; individual membership, for scholars, researchers, and academic staff; and associated membership, for organizations not formally linked to HEIs or CTLs but active in related fields.

To support its activities, the BALKANETUP utilizes an e-platform initially developed through the MAGNET project (www.magnet-project.eu/), enabling members to engage in staff training, conduct research, and share resources. The platform also serves as a space for networking and communication, supplemented by online forums (https://magnet-project.eu/balkanetup/register), social media, and newsletters

(https://magnet-project.eu/index.php/project/newsletter). A focus on digital technologies underpins the network's efforts, with specific training provided to help academic staff integrate digital tools and innovative strategies into their teaching. These initiatives are designed to address the increasing digitization of higher education and the corresponding demands on educators.

The governance of the BALKANETUP is managed by an Assembly, which includes all members, and a Steering Committee composed of three members elected for a three-year term. The Steering Committee oversees the network's operations, including the preparation of management plans, coordination of activities, and monitoring of progress. It is supported by additional roles, such as a secretary, treasurer, and technical officers, who provide administrative and logistical assistance. Committees and working groups may also be established to address specific tasks or projects, allowing the network to respond flexibly to emerging needs and priorities.

In the Tirana Meeting (31/08 -2/09 2023) all MAGNET's partners agreed that the Steering Committee of the BALKANETUP may be assisted by an external body, called Scientific Consulting Committee for BALKANETUP, consisting of four experts in the field of University Pedagogy. Their role is to contribute with their experience in order to establish the best possible methods, regarding the quality of communication, engagement, implementation of the most successful practices, analysis, and identification of ideas and measures for corrections and improvements/optimizations necessary to achieve the objectives of the BALKANETUP.

Members of the BALKANETUP are expected to contribute actively to the network's goals by participating in activities, sharing knowledge, and adhering to ethical standards that promote mutual respect and collaboration. The network emphasizes a commitment to continuous improvement in teaching and learning practices, fostering a culture that values evidence-based approaches and student-centered pedagogy. While the network originated as part of the MAGNET project, it has since expanded its membership to include HEIs, CTLs, and educational organizations across the Western Balkans and beyond, creating opportunities for broader collaboration and engagement.

The BALKANETUP also establishes connections with existing European networks and seeks partnerships to align its activities with international standards and practices. By facilitating communication and collaboration among its members, the network hopes to provide a framework for collective efforts to address the challenges of higher education in the region. Its emphasis on structured governance, targeted

professional development, and shared resources reflects its commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning in a manner that is sustainable and inclusive.

3.2.3 Activities and Initiatives

The BALKANETUP network organizes a range of educational activities to support its mission of advancing teaching and learning practices in HEIs across the Western Balkans. These activities include conferences, seminars, webinars, and workshops that provide platforms for academic staff to engage with contemporary pedagogical strategies and share their experiences. Additionally, the network conducts research and surveys to generate insights into higher education pedagogy and its challenges, which are then disseminated among members to inform their practices. The sharing of good practices and the distribution of teaching materials further support members by providing access to resources that can enhance their educational methodologies. Collectively, these activities contribute to the professional growth of educators and the overall improvement of pedagogical approaches in member institutions.

The impact of these activities should extend beyond individual members, positively influencing institutions by fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation. Through participation in the BALKANETUP's initiatives, educators will gain exposure to new ideas, tools, and practices that can be applied in their teaching, thereby improving the learning experience for students. Member institutions are expected to benefit from the establishment of stronger networks and partnerships, which facilitate the exchange of knowledge and resources, and from the broader dissemination of modern teaching techniques tailored to various disciplines and contexts.

To ensure effective communication and coordination, the network has developed a communication plan that outlines its objectives, audiences, and methods. The plan employs a combination of digital and traditional tools to create an inclusive and dynamic environment for member interaction. Central to this strategy is an e-platform established through the MAGNET project, which enables online storage, mailing lists, and newsletters. Members can also participate in an online forum, virtual meetings, and webinars, providing opportunities for real-time collaboration. Video conferencing, collaboration tools such as Google Drive, and the use of websites further support communication, while an annual meeting offers an option for face-to-face interaction.

Dissemination of the network's activities and outcomes is carried out through multiple channels, ensuring broad visibility and engagement. Social media platforms,

including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, play a key role in promoting the BALKANETUP and sharing updates on its initiatives. A dedicated website strives to provide detailed information about the network's mission, activities, and membership, as well as access to teaching and learning resources. The network leverages its connections with HEIs' websites to enhance its reach and visibility, and regular newsletters are distributed to members and other stakeholders in the higher education community. Collaboration with media outlets, such as newspapers and online news portals, further amplifies its presence, while email marketing campaigns and partnerships with organizations help attract potential members and stakeholders.

In addition to these channels, the BALKANETUP hopes to maintain a strong scientific presence. It is committed to organizing and participating in conferences and workshops dedicated to teaching and learning in higher education in the Balkans, and its activities are featured in national and international scientific journals. Research conducted by the network in areas such as University Pedagogy, adult education, and lifelong learning is disseminated to enrich the academic discourse and provide evidence-based insights for practitioners and policymakers.

The network also emphasizes the role of its members in promoting its activities and outcomes. Members are encouraged to collaborate with universities, research centers, and professional associations in the higher education sector, acting as ambassadors for University Pedagogy within their institutions. To further support dissemination efforts, the BALKANETUP licenses its materials under a Creative Commons license, making them accessible to all members. An annual activity report, coupled with events to discuss future strategies, helps align members' efforts and ensures transparency and engagement.

By employing these diverse methods, the BALKANETUP intends to enhance its visibility, broaden its impact, and attract new members and partners who share its mission of fostering excellence in teaching and learning in higher education. Through sustained communication, dissemination, and collaboration, the network aims to create a cohesive and well-supported community committed to advancing pedagogical practices in the Western Balkans.

4. Challenges and Opportunities of HEIs' networking in the Western Balkans

Research indicates that teaching staff across universities in the participating countries recognize the need for professional training. They express interest in accredited training

and envision a hub that functions not only as a training center but also as a networking and communication focal point. Blended learning and face-to-face training appear to be the most appropriate formats for such professional development initiatives.

In the context of the Western Balkans, critical questions arise about the abilities university teachers must possess to meet societal expectations. Society increasingly views them as advisors and mentors guiding students in their pursuit of knowledge. Identifying these abilities raises further questions: *What kind of education and training do university teachers need? How can this training be certified in higher education?* Academics must also reflect on their own practices: *How do I approach my teaching? Are my methods and techniques effective? How can I improve? Who can support me?*

The BALKANETUP serves as a community of practice and communication in the Western Balkans. It provides tools and facilitates the exchange of best practices among participating institutions, faculty, scholars, experts, and stakeholders. It fosters collaboration and sharing among educators dedicated to improving their teaching practices and enhancing educational quality for students. This community offers an active context where members can learn from one another, sharing knowledge, experiences, and strategies.

5. Conclusions and Future Directions

The field of Pedagogy at HEIs requires fundamental development, including modern systemic solutions in the organization of faculty work while monitoring social aspects in the field of education. Creating a network that serves as a repository of both well established and cutting-edge literature and materials related to this field is feasible. Ensuring the proper functioning, governance and continuity of the BALKANETUP after the completion of the MAGNET project, members should not only continue supporting this community but also expand it with new members from countries of the Western Balkan countries and beyond, including public and private universities, institutions, educational organizations within Higher Education, and individuals.

By prioritizing the sharing of knowledge and best practices, the BALKANETUP could foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching and learning in higher education. To ensure sustainability, it should explore possible partnerships with organizations and institutions, whose resources and expertise can enhance its program and initiatives. This could help to increase the network's visibility and influence and

sustain its influence and relevance over time. To achieve this goal, the BALKANETUP is based on a clear purpose and goals that are communicated to its members. Encouraging active participation from members is crucial for the sustainability of this network and can be achieved by active participation in organized regular meetings, discussions, webinars and training sessions that are relevant to the needs of the members. Collaboration and knowledge-sharing are key components of a sustainable networking. The BALKANETUP can create opportunities for its members to collaborate on projects, share best practices, and learn from each other. It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of the network through regular feedback from members, measure the impact of network activities, and make changes in order to improve the network's sustainability and effectiveness.

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