



# Policy paper: Vetting in Higher Education

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# POLICY PAPER:

## Introduction of the vetting process in higher education

Over the past decade, higher education in the Republic of North Macedonia has been marked by low quality and a lack of transparency. As a consequence, every academic year witnesses a decrease of 1,000 fewer students enrolling for their first year, alongside a rising number of individuals opting to pursue their studies abroad. The educational system faces a critical situation and a state of emergency, therefore declaring a state of emergency by the North Macedonia Assembly would represent the initial step in the comprehensive transformation of this worn-out system that fails to deliver quality.

Therefore, this policy paper advocates for the expansion of the **vetting process in higher education institutions**, explicitly targeting three key areas: professors in managerial positions, members of the Accreditation Board, and advancing the criterias for promotion in academic titles. By implementing rigorous vetting procedures in these areas, universities can improve accountability, fight corruption and ensure the integrity of academic titles.

### What does vetting in higher education mean?

Numerous sources define the vetting process as the process of appraising or checking a person or thing for suitability, accuracy, or validity<sup>1</sup>.

The vetting process in higher education refers to a systematic and comprehensive procedure applied to evaluate, assess and verify various aspects of individuals, programs or entities in the academic area. This process aims to ensure quality, credibility and integrity in higher education, research efforts and administrative decisions. Through the vetting process, higher education institutions accurately review and confirm the qualifications, credentials, and appropriateness of faculty members, administrators, and persons holding managerial positions in universities/faculties. In addition, the process extends to the accreditation of academic programs, verification of research methodologies, and evaluation of collaborations' conformity to institutional values and goals.

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<sup>1</sup>Definition of vetting: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/vetting>

The significance of the vetting process advancement in higher education shall not be **overstated**. It serves as the foundation for maintaining academic reputation, nurturing a culture of excellence and supporting the trust of stakeholders, including students, faculty, professors and the wider academic community. By implementing a strong vetting process, higher education institutions will not only maintain their own integrity but will contribute to further advancement of knowledge, skills and innovations in society.

### ***1. University professors who hold managerial positions (rectors, vice-rectors, deans, vice-deans)***

University professors who hold managerial positions have a significant influence on the direction and policies of academic institutions. They are vested with pivotal decision-making authority, encompassing tasks such as curriculum development, resource allocation (budgetary management), and academic governance. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to scrutinize their income and capabilities to ensure that these institutions are managed efficiently, ethically and with a focus on academic excellence. First, it would enable the identification of any potential conflicts of interest or ethical concerns that could jeopardize the academic community and the student experience in the faculties. Second, it will ensure that individuals entrusted with managing our educational institutions demonstrate the highest standards of professional competence, ethical behavior, and a commitment to the advancement of education. This process will strengthen public trust in our educational and academic institutions.

- As the Forum for Educational Change, we propose that the **State Education Inspectorate** should have the obligation, at the beginning of each academic year (1st of October), to **conduct regular and extraordinary inspections** in the public, private, and public-private higher education institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia.
- The **State Audit Office** should conduct financial inspections in universities and academic units after each academic year to verify whether the provisions of the Law for Accounting on the Budget and the Budget Users have been fully applied and whether there are any irregularities or misappropriation of public budget funds.

### ***2. Vetting of the Accreditation Board in higher education***

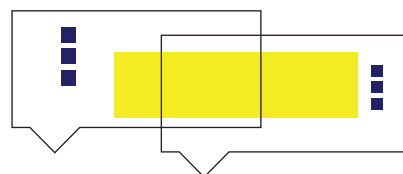
It is essential that the vetting process is conducted for all members of the accreditation board due to the significant responsibility of granting approval for various study programs to faculties for admitting students. To prevent potential corruption and undue influence, it is of paramount importance that all members of the Accreditation Board undergo a rigorous vetting process. This process should involve thorough background checks, an evaluation of their professional ethics, and transparency in decision-making. By choosing competent and impartial individuals, the integrity of the accreditation process can be

maintained, ensuring fair approval of study programs and upholding the credibility of higher education institutions. The Accreditation Board should adhere to all regulations (ESG regulations)<sup>2</sup> as a member of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), namely the accreditation standards for programs. The qualifications resulting from the programs should be specified and correspond to the exact level of the national qualifications framework for higher education, and consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Additionally, the Forum for Educational Change proposes an amendment to the Law of Higher Education, where members of the accreditation board should not be affiliated with any university structure (rectorate, senate).

### **3. Examination under what conditions and criteria professors were elected to their titles and advancing the current criterias**

Promotion to academic titles of **assistant professor, associate professor and full professor**, reflect the expertise and significant contributions to the academic community. However, concerns have arisen about the legitimacy of the promotion of certain professors and the potential existence of concealed documents. The vetting process must be expanded to conduct a comprehensive examination of how some university professors are promoted to academic titles, under what conditions and criteria, and whether legal conditions for promotion have been adhered to. This is imperative for high-quality higher education. As the **Forum for Educational Change, we propose:**

- The establishment of an independent national commission that will be responsible for conducting a comprehensive vetting process for the promotion to academic titles of all university professors in the last 15 years in the country. Additionally, for these proposals to yield results, the Forum for Educational Change proposes an amendment to the Law of Higher Education, Article 206, Paragraph 3. **In Article 206, Paragraph 3, a new point should be added<sup>3</sup>:** “The State Education Inspectorate may observe the legality of procedures for the election to teaching, teaching-scientific, and associate positions, as well as the fulfillment of election criteria, and may initiate proceedings before the competent court **15 years from the day when the election took place.**”



<sup>2</sup> Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)

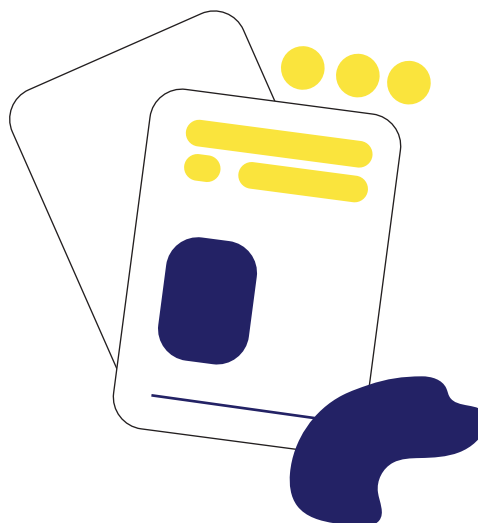
<sup>3</sup> Highlighted parts are the amendments we propose to be made in the Law of Higher Education

- The independent national commission to create a framework with criteria that will be part of their mandate for the full verification of advancements of professors in academic callings. For example, the independent national commission should not make any compromises for professors who plagiarized their doctorates and were then promoted to assistant professor. As well as for associate and full professors who do not meet some of the positive criteria, they should be given a period of 5 years to meet the same criteria for academic advancement.

On the other hand, **the transparency of state universities** in North Macedonia can be defined as **inadequate**, if not **nonexistent**, which is reinforced by the fact that universities in North Macedonia have a long history of being opaque and showing no transparency to the public. They often keep critical and vital documents out of public sight, such as statutes and financial records. Transparency with such documents of public interest is crucial in a democracy. As a measure to strengthen the transparency of higher education institutions in North Macedonia, we propose:

- **Live streaming the meetings of the Senate of state universities.** This measure aims to address the current lack of transparency in their operations, as confirmed. By live streaming these meetings, the public and stakeholders will have direct access and **observe** decision-making processes in detail, encouraging openness and accountability in the higher education system.
- **Publishing** all important **public documents** on the universities' website to make them accessible to every citizen. Additionally, all state universities must publish on website, the CVs of all engaged professors in the university/faculty.

**Forum for Educational Change** considers that these measures will significantly contribute to the ongoing efforts to improve the quality of higher education and promote a culture of excellence in our academic institutions. Expanding the vetting process in higher education, where significant issues exist, aligns with our shared vision of creating a progressive, inclusive, and advanced educational system in the Republic of North Macedonia.





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