



Evaluation Report

Executive Master degree programme
Territorial Planning and Economic Development of
Rural Areas

Offered by

Agricultural University of Tirana (Albania)

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Abbreviations

ASEA	Albanian “Standards of External Assessment”
AQF	The Albanian Qualifications Framework
DEPRD	Department of Economy and Policy of Rural Development
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FEA	Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
QA	Quality Assurance
SAR	Self-Assessment Report
SSC	Subject-Specific Criteria
UBT	Agricultural University of Tirana (Albanian: Universiteti Bujqësor i Tiranës)

A Executive Summary

On the basis of the SAR, the audit discussions, the statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee as well as additional documentation submitted along with the statement, the expert panel considers the Executive Master on a good way to matching the Albanian (and European) quality standards.¹

Taking into account the planned, proposed or already implemented modifications, the experts recommend as follows in an effort to thereby contribute to the quality development of the Executive Master programme:²

10 Recommendations

Concept and content

- 15 R1 The programme learning objectives should be revised in order to specify and concretize the intended knowledge, skills and competences in the respective field. They should be made publicly available to all interested stakeholders. [E-2]
- R2 Feedback of stakeholders should be requested on a regular basis in order to evaluate the adequacy of the learning objectives as well as the design of the programme and adapt them, if necessary. [E-2]
- R3 The name of the programme should be re-considered in order to better reflect integrated and sustainable regional development as a broader framework. [E-3]
- 20 R4 With regard to the concept of “Integrated Regional Development” further efforts should be undertaken to better balance the major dimensions in the planning field (economic, ecological, social, cultural and political). [E-4]
- R5 Cross-border interaction and cooperation should be strengthened in the course of the further development of the programme, thereby addressing the challenges of diversity and different planning systems in border regions. [E-4]
- 25

¹ As to these standards, please refer to sec. C.

² For details, please refer to sec. G.

R6 A reasonable amount of fieldwork and, in general, project orientation should be a major focus of the teaching mode in order to raise the professional competences of the graduates effectively. [E-5]

Admission

5 R7 As a major source of information with respect to the students' motivation, qualification and eligibility for the Executive Master programme, the admission interview should be a legally binding part of the admission procedure. [E-6]

Learning and Teaching

10 R8 The coordination of the Type B modules and the provision of the related practical files shall be implemented as proposed in the statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee. [E-8]

15 R9 Elements of online teaching successfully applied during the Covid-19 pandemic should be maintained in order to alleviate the engagement of visiting lecturers, the flexibility of teaching organization as well as the sustainability of teaching and learning. [E-9]

R10 It is recommended considering means to facilitate student mobility nationally and abroad within the curriculum of the programme. [E-9]

Internationalization

20 R11 With a view to fostering the internationalization of the programme as well as broadening the job opportunities of graduates, English should be established as main teaching language. [E-9]

25 R12 The already envisaged path of internationalization of the programme should be continued. Intensifying the network and collaboration with the partner universities should play a key role, and including research cooperation into this effort could constitute a strong supplementary incentive. [E-11]

Quality Assurance

R13 Internal and external stakeholders should be included more systematically in the quality assurance of the programme. [E-12]

30 R14 Course/module evaluations should be advanced in order to more adequately reflect the characteristics of the Executive Master programme (as opposed to regular study programmes) and to include regular feedback to students. [E-12]

R15 A monitoring scheme for student workload as proposed in the consortium's statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee should be put in place in order to allow timely adjustments of significant discrepancies between credit allocation and workload calculation. [E-7]

5 R16 UBT should develop and put in place a viable means to enable a successful combination of studying the full-time programme and a professional occupation. [E-7]

Transparency

10 R17 Study-related information such as the programme learning outcomes, module descriptions, rules and regulations should be made publicly available in English language. [E-13]

R18 A diploma supplement providing information about the graduates' qualification profile, the structure and content of the programme, the graduates' individual performance etc. should be drafted – in line with the related provision of the study programme regulation. [E-13]

15

B About the Evaluation Procedure

Title of the Programme / English	Title of the Programme / Albanian
Executive Master in <i>Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas</i>	Master Ekzekutiv në <i>Planifikim dhe Zhvillim Ekonomik Territorial i Zonave Rurale</i>
<p>Date of the contract: 29.04.2021</p> <p>Submission of the final version of the self-assessment report: 21.06.2021</p> <p>Date of the remote audit: 07.-09.07.2021</p> <p>at: no site visit</p>	
<p>Peer panel:</p> <p>Prof. Dr. Joerg Knieling, Hafen-City University Hamburg, Head of Institute of Urban Planning and Regional Development;</p> <p>Dr.-Ing. Evelyn Gustedt, Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association, Head of Department of European and International Aspects of Spatial Development;</p> <p>Anna-Lena Puttkamer, Master student in Geography and Environmental Sciences at University of Cologne</p>	
<p>Representative of the ASIIN headquarter: Dr. Siegfried Hermes</p>	
<p>Criteria used:</p> <p>Criteria for the Accreditation of Degree Programmes – ASIIN Quality Seal as of 10 December 2015.</p> <p>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as of 15 May 2015.</p> <p>(Albanian) Standards provided along with the “Call for Tender” of the evaluation assignment in April 2021</p>	

B About the Evaluation Procedure

In order to facilitate the legibility of this document, only masculine noun forms will be used hereinafter. Any gender-specific terms used in this document apply to both women and men.

C Methodology, Aims and Rationale

According to the call for tender, the evaluation of the Executive Master Programme in “Territorial Planning and Economic Development of the Rural Areas” aims at providing “a detailed analysis of the teaching modules developed in the framework of SmartAL project, in line with the Albanian national legislation [...] and a detailed Report of evaluation and recommendations to enhance the quality of the study program, themselves being in line with the Bologna criteria”.

Thereby, the evaluation report “should follow a clear and approved ENQA Methodology for external study program evaluation, and provide detailed and useful recommendations in order to improve the study program quality and prepare the latter for an external evaluation by the Albanian Higher Education accreditation authorities”.

In order to achieve these aims, the evaluation procedure has been carried out according to the ASIIN procedural principles and general criteria for the accreditation of study programmes as an “approved ENQA Methodology for external study program evaluation”. At the same time, the Albanian standards presented in the “Call for tender” for this evaluation assignment have been applied in order to cover all relevant fields of assessment as required by Albanian higher education authorities.³ For this purpose, a detailed synopsis of the two sets of standards has been undertaken beforehand (see annex to this report). This synopsis has been circulated to the consortium members as commissioning party of the evaluation in advance.

Accordingly, the structure of this report refers to the “Standards’ matrix” as follows:

Section of Evaluation Report	ASIIN “General Criteria”	Albanian “Standards of External Assessment” (ASEA)
E-1 Formal and legal information	–	II.1, II.2, II.3
E-2 Study objectives and learning outcomes	1.1	I.1, I.2, I.3
E-3 Name of the degree programme	1.2	–

³ These Standards reflect an **adapted version** of the already existing standards for second cycle programmes of the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL). Cf. for instance the “Quality Assurance Standards for Second Cycle Study Program Master of Professional Studies”; available on the internet: https://www.ascal.al/media/documents/standardet/EN_Standardet-per-programet-e-studimit-te-ciklit-te-dyte-Master-Profesional.pdf (Access: 18.07.2021)). No standards for the new “third-cycle” Executive Master Programmes have been provided or published yet.

Section of Evaluation Report	ASIIN “General Criteria”	Albanian “Standards of External Assessment” (ASEA)
E-4 Curriculum and structure/modularization	1.3, 2.1	II.4, II.8
E-5 Practical orientation and prospects of the labour market	2.1	III.7
E-6 Admission requirements	1.4	V.1, V.2
E-7 Workload and credits	2.2	–
E-8 Examination and supervision	3	III.5, III.6, III.8; V.1, V.2
E-9 Didactical methods	2.3	III.2
E-10 Guidance and support services	2.4	II.7; V.8
E-11 Resources	4.1 (Staff) 4.2 (Staff Development) 4.3 (Institutional setting, funding and equipment) –	I.4, I.6; II.5; IV.1, IV.2; V.6, V.7 III.1, III.2, III.3, III.4 I.5; III.3; IV.3, IV.4, IV.6 IV.5, V.4 (Internal management system)
E-12 Quality management: Development and enhancement	6	II.6; V.5; VI.1, VI.2, VI.3, VI.4
E-13 Documentation and transparency	5.1 (Module descriptions) 5.2 (Diploma and Diploma Supplement) 5.3 (Relevant rules)	– – III.8; V.2, V.3; VI.5

The following sections of the report are based on the audit discussions the expert panel had with relevant stakeholder groups. These are representatives of the consortium of universities, the rectorate and management of the Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT), the coordinator, teaching staff and students of the programme at UBT, representatives of the responsible Albanian ministry, the embassies of France and Greece, as well as of the mu-

nicipality of Tirana. The focus of this evaluation phase lies on the assessment of the Executive Master Programme. In addition to the audit meetings, the expert panel thereby relies on the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) about the programme and the documentary respectively regulatory framework UBT has submitted before, during and after the audit.

D Characteristics of the Executive Master Programme

a) Name of the programme	b) Degree awarded upon conclusion	c) Corresponding level of the European Qualifications Framework	d) Mode of Study	e) Duration & Credit Points	f) First time of offer & Intake rhythm	g) Number of students per intake	h) Fees
Master Ekzekutiv në Planifikim dhe Zhvillim Ekonomik Territorial i Zonave Rurale	Executive Master in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas	8	Full time	4 Semester 120 CP	autumn term 2020/2021; once a year in autumn	25 students for first batch / to be assigned per academic year	1000 EUR in total

E Assessment of the Expert Panel

E-1 Formal and legal information

(ASEA II.1, II.2, II.3)

Evidence

- 5 • “Project Proposal for Opening Study Program” (Executive Master Programme) by Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT), Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness, Department of Economy and Rural Development Policies (FEA), Annex to the SAR
- 10 • “Methodological Note: The Quality Assurance System for Executive Master modules” (Annex 9), developed within the Project Smart AL (“Master European Innovations for a Sustainable Management of Albanian Territories, Rural Areas and Agriculture: Instruments, Policies, Strategies”), Annex to the SAR
- 15 • Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania, available on the internet: https://www.as-cal.al/media/documents/legjislacioni/Law%20no.%2080_2015.pdf (Access: 18.07.2021)
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Chap. V: Third Cycle Programs (henceforward “Study regulation”, Annex to the SAR
- Audit discussions

20 Status of the programme

In the project proposal and the SAR, UBT describes the rationale behind the establishment and implementation of the Executive Master Programme. According to the latter, the territorial reform occurring in Albania in 2014 has led to a major territorial reorganisation by reducing the hitherto roughly 400 administrative units to 61, whereas urban areas have
25 been merged with rural ones. Planning, development and management of areas several times larger than before face administrators, managers, planners, and decision-makers at the central and local levels with new challenges requiring inter- and multidisciplinary competences, which up to then were not within their professional mind-set. In combination with the Albanian accession policies to the European Union, this places the European
30 concept of territorial cohesion with its overarching aim to balance economic effectiveness, social cohesion and ecological sustainability at the centre of policy-making – as the SAR points out.

Before this background, three Albanian universities with UBT as their frontrunner⁴ and four European universities⁵ teamed up for an Erasmus+ capacity-building project aiming at the development and implementation of a Higher Education (HE) degree programme designed to fill the specific knowledge and competence gap described above.

5 The consortium decided to jointly develop a degree programme addressing the newly demanded knowledge and skills of practitioners (administrators, planners, decision-makers, data miners) in the field. For this purpose, the educational format of an “Executive Master” programme was chosen. According to the 2015 novel Albanian “Law on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania”, the Executive Master – besides so-called long-term specialized study programmes and doctoral studies – is considered a third cycle programme referring to level 8 of the Albanian Qualifications Framework (AQF, Art. 77 No. 1). Furthermore, Executive Master Programmes shall offer “a high level of scientific and professional education”, and have a normal duration of one or two academic years comprising 60 or 120 credits respectively. Students complete their study of an Executive Master with a Diploma thesis and are issued a diploma “Executive Master” after successful graduation (see for all that Art. 77 No. 2).

The Executive Master in *Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas* was developed and for the first time implemented at UBT in the autumn term 2020/21. The programme is presented as a four-semester full-time programme with a credit load of altogether 120 ECTS. The programme is concluded with a Diploma thesis and issued a diploma “Executive Master” (Art. 15, 16, and 20 Study regulation).

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The expert team takes note of the framework of the Executive Master Programme under review. The peers do perceive the new challenges originating from the territorial reform in Albania and the need for additional competences of Albanian professionals in the planning, development and management of the reshaped Albanian territories. In their perspective, the resulting degree programme fits generally well into the continuous professional development of the targeted practitioners. In addition, the Albanian “Executive Master” is an educational format, which convincingly addresses the educational needs of mostly specialised professionals in the area of planning, developing and managing territories.

The Executive Master in *Territorial planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas* obviously fits the major legal requirements defined for this kind of third-cycle programmes

⁴ University of Korça “Fan S Noli” (UNKO), European University of Tirana (UET), Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT).

⁵ Centre International de Hautes Etudes Agronomiques Méditerranéennes – Institut Agronomique Méditerranéen de Montpellier (CIHEAM-IAMM), University of Hohenheim (UHOH), Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (UPSPS), Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (UPVM).

(two years of study, full-time study, 120 ECTS, Diploma thesis, Diploma “Executive Master”). Further aspects in this regard (such as the admission/entry requirements or the share of practical work to be done as an obligatory part of the curriculum) will be treated in the respective sections of this report.

5 Apart from that, the experts stress the constitutive dimension of the further development of professional qualifications making the Executive Master Programme comparable to similar postgraduate educational programmes in other European countries. The peers understand that for systematic reasons post-graduate programmes such as the Executive Master are classified third-cycle programmes. Not least with regard to the prerequisite Master degree, which applicants must have (see sec. E-6), this is considered reasonable. However, 10 the programme learning objectives in accordance with the contents of the programme confirm in the opinion of the peers that the programme clearly refers to the Master’s level of the European as well as the Albanian Qualification Framework (level 7 EQF/AQF). The qualification profile of graduates cannot be related to EQF 8. Neither the intended learning 15 outcomes nor the contents of the programme do suggest the achievement of “knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study”, “the most advanced and specialized skills and techniques [...] required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation”, and a “sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research”.⁶ The phrasing in the AQF 20 maybe a bit more generic, but is just as little defining for the Executive Master as are the EQF indicators. Yet, the expert panel is not sure about the correct meaning of the respective provision (Art. 77 No. 1 Law on Higher Education). It therefore only points to this categorization and suggests reconsidering it, if necessary, in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

Recommendations

25 *No recommendations.*

E-2 Study objectives and learning outcomes

(ASIIN 1.1; ASEA I.1, I.2, I.3)

Evidence

- 30 • “Project Proposal for Opening Study Program” (Executive Master Programme) by Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT), Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness, Department of Economy and Rural Development Policies, Annex to the SAR
- SAR provided by the Smart AL consortium

⁶ These are the indicators of the EQF.

- Objectives Module Matrix, Annex to the SAR
- Job market review & Training needs analysis, Annex to the SAR
- Audit discussions

Status of the programme

5 UBT, the Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness (FEA), and more specifically the Department of Economy and Policy of Rural Development (DEPRD) have defined programme learning objectives for the Executive Master under consideration.

10 In the SAR, programme coordinators have convincingly demonstrated that UBT is an Albanian hub of teaching and research in all fields related to the economics, policy and management of rural space. According to this, FEA not only offers related first and second cycle programmes such as “Economics and Policy of the Rural Development” on the Bachelor level and “Economics and Agrarian Policy programme” on the (scientific) Master level, but is renowned for undertaking major research activities in these areas as well.⁷ Hence, the extension of this portfolio of education programmes through an Executive Master aimed
15 at conveying interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary competencies to a new target group – professionals in the field of planning, development and management of rural areas – is presented as a logical step in the strategic development policy of UBT. Whereas in the cited Bachelor and Master programmes, students would receive in-depth information on specific fields of development at the local level (economics, urbanism, environment etc.), the Executive Master claims to address “the interdisciplinary characteristics
20 of the local economic development that would enable the proposal of sustainable solutions in the framework of territorial development based on European standards”.

Thus, the SAR (p. 5f.) states the following **learning objectives** for the Executive Master:

25 “This study programme aims to train genuine specialists in the field of territorial development, with a focus on ‘Planning and Territorial Development’. The main formative objectives of the study programme are:

- To prepare skilled specialists in the field of territorial planning and organization, public policy and innovation, enabled this through the study curriculum, which offers students:
- 30 • In-depth knowledge of the theory of territorial administration and organization, public policy and innovation;

⁷ This will be treated in more detail as part of the section “Resources” (see sec. E-11).

- Analysis of public policies in the context of territorial organization and the dimension of environmental sustainability, illustrated with practical examples, at regional, national and international level;
- Analysis of the challenges and needs for the organization of the territory;
- 5 • Capacity development on methods / techniques needed for territory analysis and management;
- Capacity development for understanding the context of territorial cohesion (local, national and international);
- Capacity development on territorial development plans;
- 10 • Knowledge of the links and differences between environmental economics and territorial cohesion;
- Knowledge of economic evaluation of local development economic projects;
- Knowledge of European Union public policies on social cohesion;
- Development of a set of policies, tools for the characterization of the "landscape" based on environmental and natural assets to support sustainable development of the territory;
- 15 • In-depth technical professional training to foster decision-making skills.

More specifically, this study programme aims to offer students:

- Very good socio-economic, environmental and institutional knowledge for a certain territory,
- 20 • Professional competence in making a territorial diagnostic, consideration of socio-economic, environmental and institutional elements,
- Essential competence in creating, addressing and presenting economic solutions at the practical and policy-making level,
- 25 • Competence for the preparation and implementation of a territorial organization and development project."

In an initial "Job market review & Training needs analysis", the Smart AL consortium identified and afterwards confirmed in stakeholder and focus group interviews a series of field-related skills grouped around three main competence areas: a) Rural development policies and instruments, b) Territory management, and c) Environment. Under the heading "Rural development policies and instruments" skills such as "Project design, preparation, and evaluation", "Innovation in rural areas" or "Pre-accession EU funds (application, project fiches

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preparation and management rules”) are summarized. “Territory management” according to this stocktaking analysis consists of competencies ranging from “Spatial economics”, to “Territory management instruments GIS LPS” and “Data management”. “Environment management skills”, finally, are summarized inter alia through “Evaluation methods of natural resources (land, water, forestry)”, “Environmental impact assessment”, and “Climate change mitigation”. Based on this, the consortium extracted five field-related qualification profiles (project managers, administrators, field specialists, planners, and data managers) with some distinctions of competence levels required for the different profiles.

In an objectives-module matrix, competence fields inconsistently linked to the above programme learning objectives are related to the curriculum/modules in order to demonstrate their effective transposition.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The expert panel notes that programme-specific learning objectives have been defined reflecting the academic (Master) education in the discipline of territorial planning. These learning objectives cover different cognitive competence dimensions such as broadened knowledge of major subjects, advanced analytical and methodological skills as well as complex evaluation competencies and transversal skills. However, the provided list of competences (here in the sense of an umbrella term) lacks precision in some cases. Thus, for instance, formulations such as “Capacity development on methods / techniques needed for territory analysis and management”, “Capacity development for understanding the context of territorial cohesion (local, national and international)” and “Capacity development on territorial development plans” only insufficiently indicate the competency level to be acquired in the respective knowledge area. Regarding the “Knowledge of economic evaluation of local development economic projects”, the peers assume that graduates should not only have “knowledge” about methods of “economic evaluation of local economic development projects”, but also be trained and able to apply them in practical cases. With respect to missing clarity in the definition of learning objectives, the panel suggests revising them, thereby more precisely indicating the competency level in the activity fields addressed. Using a well-established taxonomy for this purpose might be helpful.⁸

Moreover, the learning objectives should be made publicly available to all stakeholders (e.g. on a programme website), which apparently they are not at present.

The peers positively note, however, that the learning objectives as presented in the SAR are defined in such manner that they reflect a deliberately comprehensive approach on the

⁸ See for instance: A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing : a revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, Lorin W. Anderson, David Krathwohl (eds.), New York : Longman, 2001.

territorial and economic development of rural areas. In this respect, the intended qualification profile of graduates of the programme (as described in the learning objectives) is reasonably derived from the job market and needs analysis, thus factoring in the feedback of important stakeholder groups of the programme. Consequently, the indication of different levels of a distinguished set of abilities (knowledge, skills, competences), although revealing potential for improvement (see above), corresponds to the target group of practitioners in the field with highly heterogeneous educational backgrounds (see below sec. E-6). This, in turn, highlights that the programme design has principally been built on the academic background and professional experiences of the prioritized professional addressees.

Yet, the attention the consortium paid to external feedback while defining the programme learning objectives and the designing the curriculum, should not be a one-time exercise, but ideally renewed on a regular basis in order to keep both of them up to the demands of the professional community.

Recommendations

The programme learning objectives should be revised in order to specify and concretize the level of competence in the respective subject field. They should be made publicly available to all interested stakeholders.

Feedback of stakeholders should be requested on a regular basis in order to evaluate the adequacy of the learning objectives as well as the design of the programme and adapt them, if necessary.

E-3 Name of the degree programme

(ASIIN 1.2)

Evidence

- “Project Proposal for Opening Study Program” (Executive Master Programme) by Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT), Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness, Department of Economy and Rural Development Policies, Annex to the SAR
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Annex to the SAR
- Law No. 107/2014 “On Territorial Planning and Development” (several amendments until 2019), available on the internet: <http://planifikimi.gov.al/index.php?eID=dump-File&t=f&f=5636&token=984b991a0c725de5fa11e124cfbb746d25e5d054> (Access: 18.07.2021)
- Respective Chapter of the SAR

- Audit discussions with MCAST management and teaching staff

Status of the programme

In the “Project Proposal for Opening Study Program” from February 2020, the Executive Master Programme still carries the name “Territorial Planning and development” (in the Albanian Original: “Planifikim dhe Zhvillim Territorial”). This has changed to a more concrete and somewhat different focus in the title of the latest documents coming to the experts’ knowledge (SAR and Study regulations). There the programme is entitled “Territorial Planning and Economic Development” (in the Albanian Original: “Planifikim dhe Zhvillim Ekonomik Territorial i Zonave Rurale”).

10 Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The experts took note of the Executive Master’s title. Although not principally objecting the title, they questioned the exact meaning of the two-pillar phrase “Territorial planning and economic development” (of rural areas). According to the criteria applied for the evaluation and relevant in any accreditation procedure, the title of the programme shall adequately represent its substance in the internal and external communication. Thus, it is of utmost relevance, that the title fully corresponds to the projected learning outcomes of the programme (and its modules) as well as to the curriculum. “Territorial planning” and “economic development” on a first glance seems to deal with two subject-related fields: the highly formalized (urban or regional) planning methods, instruments and processes on the one hand and the more informally shaped processes and activities of economic development of certain areas on the other hand. With a view to the content of the programme, however, it appears that territorial planning in the former sense is no major focus of the programme, while the (particularly economic) planning and development of the rural areas seem to be predominant.

Further questions in this regard were raised by the fact that the programme title obviously has undergone changes in time. The development from “Territorial planning and development” to “Territorial planning and economic development” in the latest project phase (and in a way validated in the Study programme regulation) happened without explicit explanations for this step in the available sources (“Project proposal” and SAR for that matter). Different translation options in English add to the confusion of the peers.

With regard to these questions, the programme coordinator of UBT clarifies the up-to-now different planning traditions in the International/European as opposed to the Albanian context. Instead of the traditional prevalence of urban planners and planning methodologies in Albania, the term “territorial planning” in the programme title is considered to align with the “economic development” phrase to a comprehensive and more integrated (European-

style) public policy approach to urban and rural development. In that view, any strict distinction of two lines of education within the programme (“territorial planning” and “economic development”) would be misleading.

5 The experts agree that this re-definition of the traditional Albanian planning approach is reflected in the already discussed programme learning objectives and – although with reservations (see below sec. E-4) – in the curriculum of the Executive Master. Moreover, it fully accords with Art. 4 of the Albanian Law No. 107/2014 “On Territorial Planning and Development” defining the principles of “Territorial Planning”. As the experts understand, this law initially paves the way to a more comprehensive approach of territorial planning
10 integrating societal, economic and environmental dimensions into the development of the land. They understand that it is considered as an essential legal framework of the “Europeanization” of the Albanian territorial planning policies. The Executive Master Programme seemingly connects with the law and its formal approach in terminology and substance.

15 Nevertheless, since the title “Territorial planning and economic development of rural areas” somewhat departs from the disciplinary understanding of the terminology, the peers suggest reconsidering it in order to better reflect the broader framework aimed at in the Executive Master. This includes making aspects of integrated and sustainable regional development more visible as compared to economic issues.

Recommendations

20 The name of the programme should be re-considered in order to better reflect integrated and sustainable regional development as a broader framework.

E-4 Curriculum and structure/modularization

(ASIIN 1.3, 2.1; ASEA II.4, II.8)

Evidence

- 25
- Respective Chapters of the SAR
 - Curricular Overview / study plan of the Executive Master Programme
 - “Project Proposal for Opening Study Program” (Executive Master Programme) by Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT), Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness, Department of Economy and Rural Development Policies, Annex to the SAR
- 30
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Chap. VI, Basic Documentation of Study Programs, Art. 23pp., Annex to the SAR

- “Methodological Note: The Quality Assurance System for Executive Master modules” (Annex 9), developed within the Project Smart AL (“Master European Innovations for a Sustainable Management of Albanian Territories, Rural Areas and Agriculture: Instruments, Policies, Strategies”), Annex to the SAR
- 5
- Objectives Module Matrix, Annex to the SAR
 - Module descriptions, Annex to the SAR
 - Results of evaluations (Modules 1 to 5)
 - Audit discussions

Status of programme

10 Key factors for the initiative of the consortium to develop the programme have been mentioned in the introductory sections. The same applies to the legal framework (“Law on Territorial Planning and Development”, 2014) making the Executive Master an important building stone for the training of professionals, who are able to implement the new Albanian territorial planning and development policies.

15 Because Albanian territories are suffering from disrupting socio-economic inequalities, declining competitiveness of economic activities in urban as well as rural areas, degradation of ecosystems, increasing pollution and misuse of natural resources, there sustainable management – in the words of the SAR – shall be based on public policy instruments adapted to those of the European Union. Planning and development policies shall be designed in such manner that they comprehensively integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions, are based on inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge and include the multitude of concerned stakeholders in a participatory manner.

25 Based on this, the mandate given in the “Law on Territorial Planning and Development”, and the results of the Job market and training needs analysis, the consortium developed the curriculum consisting of altogether 12 modules (including the final work/Thesis work). The partner universities conceptualized all modules on a two-level principle. Each module comprises a certain amount of basic information on the respective discipline on the lower level and an upper level of information on methods, instruments and more specific knowledge on the related subject. In connection with this construction mode, the modules are delivered successively in a block-teaching mode, instead of the linear teaching format of regular full-time degree programmes.

30 Thereby, the modules were ordered according to for main categories:

- General modules relating to general theoretical information (Modules 1 to 3),

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- Thematic modules relating to more specific information such as economics of natural resources or regional policy (Modules 4 and 5),
- Technical modules relating to methods and techniques of data elaboration (Module 6 and 7), and
- 5 • Evaluation modules relating to political, economic and marketing evaluation methods (Modules 8 to 11).

Regarding the content of the modules, the SAR states that the cooperation partners of the consortium were deliberately chosen. While the Greek university (UPSPS) has been approached for its expertise in dealing with similar territorial reforms, French and German universities respectively were picked because of their respective excellence in fields like
10 regional planning (UPVM), resource planning (CIHEAM), and agricultural policy (UHOH).

The following curriculum has then been set up and is already running at UBT:

First Year, 1st semester

Nr.	Modules	Teaching hours	Teaching and learning hours			Practical work 50% of ECTS	Capitalised	Total hours	ECTS
			Total	Theoretical	Practical				
1									
1	Institutions and actors in Territory	5.5	82.5	45	37.5		117.5	200	8
2	Territory innovation and actions	3	45	30	15	100	55	200	8
3	Rural development Policies	2.5	37	30	7	88	50	175	7
4	Economics of Natural Resources and environment	2.5	37	30	7	88	50	175	7
	Total		201.5	135	66.5	276	272.5	750	30

First Year, 2nd semester

Nr.	Modules	Teaching hours	Teaching and learning hours			Practical work	Capitalised	Total hours	ECTS
			Total	Theoretical	Practical				
1									
1	EU territory and cohesion policy	4	60	30	30	125	65	250	10
2	Territorial administration, planning and governance	4	60	30	30	125	65	250	10
3	Data Administration and geoinformatic tools	4	60	30	30	125	65	250	10
	Total		180	90	90	339	195	750	30

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Second Year, 3rd semester

Nr.	Modules	Teaching hours	Teaching and learning hours			Practical work	Capitalised	Total hours	ECTS
			Total	Theoretical	Practical				
1									
1	Instruments and policy evaluation methods	4	60	30	30	125	65	250	10
2	Local economics management and risks (offered by UBT)	4	60	30	15	125	65	250	10
3	Project design /Preparation and evaluation	4	60	30	30	125	65	250	10
Total			180	90	90	375	195	750	30

Second Year, 4th semester

Nr.	Modules	Teaching hours	Teaching and learning hours			Practical work	Capitalised	Total hours	ECTS
			Total	Theoretical	Practical				
1									
1	Territory marketing (offered by UBT)	2.5	37	30	7	75	38	150	6
2	Thesis work						600	600	24
Total			37	30	7	75	638	750	30
TOTAL		ECTS	Hours						
		120	3000						

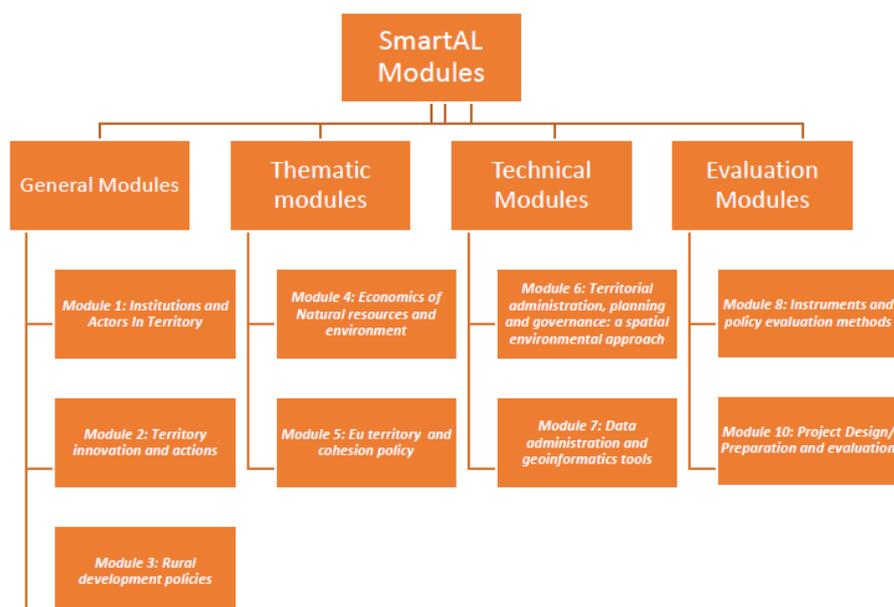
The structure of the curriculum is subject to a binding decision of the Albanian prime ministry pertaining to the Executive Master Programmes (Prime minister decision No. 879, 18.12.2019), which can be graphically illustrated as follows:

Table 1: Executive master organisation according the Prime minister decision Nr 879 on 18.12.2019

Module type	Module characteristics	Percentage of ECTS	Nb for 1 year or 60 ECTS	Nb for 2 years or 120 ECTS
A	Fundamental modules – methodological preparation and general information	5-10%	3 - 6	6 - 12
B	Characterizing modules – preparation for the scientific topic L	50-60%	30 - 36	60- 72
C	Interdisciplinary modules	12 – 15%	7 - 9	14 - 18
E	Final work	18 - 20	11 -12	21 - 24

5

In case of the Executive Master in *Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas*, this organisational scheme is implemented through the below structure.



N.B. the modules 9 on “Local economics management and risks” and 11 on “Territory marketing” are offered by Agricultural University of Tirana.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

Curriculum and programme learning objectives

In general, the expert panel highly esteems the concept of this programme. Before the political, educational and practical background of the Albanian territories described in the SAR, the Executive Master programme as a new form of further education at HE level is well suited to provide professionals in the field with science-based and hands-on knowledge. The territorial reform in Albania in combination with the EU accession policy of the country have coincided in generating a pressing need for upskilling professionals at national and local levels engaged in territorial planning and development. Hence, the Executive Master demonstrates that the political, economic, societal and environmental conditions of the now 61 Albanian territories do not only confront practitioners with serious problems, but also open up considerable opportunities for the university, students, and professionals from all ranks of territorial planning and management as well as rural and regional development. After all, the situation has initiated an international consortium connecting universities with proven expertise in the planning-related subject areas. Considering similar territorial reforms in neighbouring countries like Greece, the Executive Master could serve as a role model for the development and implementation of similar further education degree programmes at HE level. Whether the fact that neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe face comparable reform experiences might play out as an additional incentive for the internationalization perspective outlined for this programme by the UBT rectorate remains to be seen. Regarding this, the expert panel considers the cautious pleading of the programme coordinator for the successful and sustainable implementation as a

first priority reasonable. Nevertheless, intensifying cross-border interaction and cooperation through addressing the challenges of diversity and different planning systems in border regions is deemed a commendable dimension of further development of the programme. Apart from that, the internationalization perspective of the Executive Master is to a certain degree already ingrained in the constitutive university consortium (see further below sec. E-11).

The outspoken commitment of the UBT rectorate in piloting this Executive Master Programme must be highlighted positively. It might have helped that UBT obviously can count on the support of the government, in particular the line ministries concerned. Otherwise, the rectorate convincingly demonstrated that the Executive Master fits perfectly well into the teaching and research portfolio of the university and, likewise, opens up a new stratum of potential students.

Regarding the content of the Executive Master, the expert panel highly values the “Integrated Regional Development” approach reflected in the curriculum. The focus on social and territorial cohesion policies, planning and evaluation methods as well as participatory efforts aimed at the purposive inclusion of relevant actors, including particular the local communities must not be underestimated. The expert panel also understands that it is an important precondition for fully implementing the new law “On territorial planning and development” (Law No. 107/2014) to provide professionals in the central, regional and local administrations and likewise practitioners in planning agencies, consulting firms, non-governmental (private and voluntary) organisations etc. with new skills and competencies. In doing this, the interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary and multi-focal approach of the Executive Master intends to adapt to major principles of the European social and territorial cohesion policies into Albanian HE teaching and research. As this effort aims at a more horizontal interaction between different levels of government, more coordination among stakeholders in multiple sectors and an intensified partnership between public and private actors in general, the programme on its part may serve as a valuable instrument in the broader EU accession policies of the Albanian government.

While the programme title as well as some comments of UBT emphasize the role of the economic development and the reduction of regional economic disparities, programme coordinators at UBT also convincingly elaborated that the aspects of social integration and environmental sustainability are likewise paid attention to. Practitioners at national, regional and local levels shall thus be enabled to deal with planning and management issues at all levels, thereby cooperating and communicating with relevant governmental and non-governmental actors. The expert panel acknowledges that the integrative approach to the planning and development of rural areas in the case of this Executive Master has been pursued through a subject-focusing programme design. Notwithstanding this, the appearance and interplay of the major dimensions in the planning field (economic, ecological, social,

cultural and political) in the eyes of the peers could be more balanced within the curriculum. This would also contribute to an even achievement of the already discussed programme learning objectives.

5 While the contents of the modules seem adequate in terms of level and volume, the expert panel suggests to more precisely define not only the objectives of the modules but also their (intended) learning outcomes. What exactly students are supposed to know, able to do etc. has been clarified only exceptionally (see also sec. E-13). Those responsible for the modules should fulfil this task, not least as an internal proof of whether the defined programme learning objectives are fully operationalized in and covered by the modules.

10 *Structure and modularization*

Based on the given subject-oriented design of the curriculum, the composition and sequencing of the modules, including their assembling to classes of “general”, “thematic”, “technical” and “evaluation” modules, seem reasonable from the experts perspective. Furthermore, the structure of the curriculum as well as that of the modules are in accordance
15 with the Albanian legislation and Bologna principles.

Since all 12 modules (including the Diploma thesis) are mandatory parts of the curriculum, the peers question, why a certain (even very limited) amount of elective modules have been omitted in the Executive Master. Representatives of the consortium as well as the UBT programme coordinator explained that the decision against implementing an elective
20 area into the curriculum (at least in this initial stage of programme implementation) has been taken with a view to the already broad and highly interdisciplinary study content. A solid and well-founded general (further) education of professionals in the field, but no specialist training in either direction has been the underlying idea, as peers were told. In the eyes of the peers, however, one or two elective subjects would hardly lead to an unwanted
25 specialisation, but rather give students opportunities to deepen or broaden their knowledge and skills in certain fields. Particularly with regard to the professional profiles identified in the job market and training needs analysis of the consortium⁹ and with respect to the different educational backgrounds of the students, the integration of different elective subjects serving the educational purposes of different groups of professionals could be
30 a reasonable perspective for the further development of the programme.

⁹ In the analysis (p. 28ff.), five professional profiles as possible addressees of the Executive Master were identified: project managers, administrators, field specialists, planners (administrative specialists), and data managers.

Recommendations

With regard to the concept of “Integrated Regional Development” further efforts should be undertaken to balance the major dimensions in the planning field (economic, ecological, social, cultural and political).

- 5 Cross-border interaction and cooperation should be strengthened in the course of the further development of the programme, thereby addressing the challenges of diversity and different planning systems in border regions.

E-5 Practical orientation and prospects of the labour market *(ASIIN 2.1; ASEA III.7)*

10 **Evidence**

- Curricular Overview / study plan of the Executive Master Programme
- Module descriptions, Annex to the SAR
- Job market review & Training needs analysis, Annex to the SAR
- Law No. 107/2014 “On Territorial Planning and Development” (several amendments until 2019), available on the internet: <http://planifikimi.gov.al/index.php?eID=dump-File&t=f&f=5636&token=984b991a0c725de5fa11e124cfbb746d25e5d054> (Access: 18.07.2021)
- Audit discussions

Status of the programme

- 20 As mentioned repeatedly, the Executive Master in the first place is an educational offering directed towards highly qualified and specialised professionals with a need of further qualification in the field of the planning, development and management of the Albanian territories. The educational format of an “Executive Master” legally binds the education providing universities to ensure the immediate applicability of the knowledge, skills and competences to be conveyed. Professional experiences in related fields of work are not only an admission requirement of these Executive Master Programmes; rather, the programmes are supposed to directly build on working experiences, situations, and assignments. Albanian legislation on Higher Education requires students to invest at least 50% of the time of each (B-) module¹⁰ in a personal, practical and module-related work – ideally in cooperation
- 25

¹⁰ See descriptive part of sec. E-4. The Executive master organisation differentiates four types of modules: Type A: General modules; Type B: Thematic modules; Type C: Interdisciplinary modules, and Type E: Final work.

with the professional sector the student is working in. These practical works have to be concluded with a “personal file” / report. In order to ensure the comparability of the personal files across the modules, UBT adheres to a defined formatting and structural scheme. The latter inter alia includes items like recognition of institutional and territorial context of the assignment, exposition of the research questions, theoretical review, methodological approach for implementation, analysis and conclusion. The purpose of these individual practical projects is enabling but also requiring students to translate their newly gained knowledge into ways to handle assignments they face in their working practice.

Accompanying the practical works associated with almost all modules (except of the Module 12 *Thesis work* and Module 1 *Institutions and actors in territory*) are practical classes in each module, in which students are supposed to deepen their theoretical knowledge in an application-oriented manner. Thereby, the practical classes shall also prepare the students for their individual practical projects. They may embrace individual assignments or small group projects, case studies (in both research and fieldwork), tutorial workshops etc.

Regarding the labour market and job perspectives of the Executive Master Programme, the Executive Master could be seen as an initiative of the university consortium in direct response to the Albanian territorial reform 2014 and its underlying rationale. Practitioners from all ranks and levels of the territorial administration, quasi-governmental and non-governmental organisations and actors need to be provided with cross-disciplinary knowledge and competences in the planning field to implement the purpose and guiding principles of the novel law on territorial planning and development (cf. e.g. Art. 1 and 4). In line with that, the job market review and training needs analysis undertaken by the consortium has manifested this demand and thereby outlined typical professional fields, where it occurs as well as those competences, which – to a varying degree – are mostly needed.

25 **Analysis and assessment of the expert panel**

The expert panel understands that the territorial reform, which has taken place in Albania in 2014, in combination with the Albanian aspiration to access the European Union has laid bare a demand in interdisciplinary skills and competences closely related to the EU social and regional cohesion policies and planning methods. The panel highly values the ambition of the Executive Master to adapt the European concept of “Integrated Regional Development” to the Albanian context and therewith to implement particular governance principles not familiar in the Albanian territorial planning policies and education until then. The understandable interest of the government in this undertaking in the eyes of the peers is a formidable guarantee for the sustainability of the Executive Master even after the Erasmus+ project lifetime. The long-time process of the “Europeanization” of the Albanian planning culture will likewise serve as a backbone for a sustained demand in the skills and competences this Master promises to deliver. In addition, the training needs analysis of the

consortium has convincingly demonstrated the supposed demand, identified major activity fields and confirmed qualifications as yet missing, which the Executive Master is intend to cover.

5 The expert panel is convinced that the concept of a deeply intertwined theoretical and practical education – as carried out in the Executive Master – does not only adhere to the requirements of the Albanian legislation on Executive Master Programmes. The SAR and especially the discussions with both lecturers and students rather demonstrated how consequentially and successfully theoretical knowledge and its practical utilization are connected in the concept and implementation of the programme. The experts acknowledge in
10 this regard that individual project files resulting from particularly workplace-related study assignments need to be reflective of the study programme in terms of topics and contents. It is positively noted that UBT has put in place a regulatory regimen ensuring this. Whether this regulatory framework also encompasses a reliable time scheduling of the individual project files remains to be seen and will be assessed later (see below sec. E-7).

15 Still, the students indicated that fieldwork in their view forms a decisive part of the profession-orientation of the programme and therefore should be generally strengthened in the programme. The peers agree to the lecturers' argument that the pandemic has put considerable stress particularly on this part of the didactical concept, in fact barring its implementation. Yet, they also generally share the students' perception of the importance of field-
20 work for an informed application of the acquired theoretical knowledge and methodological skills. According to the module descriptions though, only few modules do formally entail fieldwork as part of the practical sessions or the individual practical/research projects. That is why the expert panel suggests to integrate, wherever possible and appropriate, a meaningful amount of fieldwork and (in a broader view) project-oriented work in the practical
25 parts of the Executive Master.

Recommendations

A reasonable amount of fieldwork and, more generally, project orientation should be a major focus of the teaching mode in order to raise the professional competences of the graduates effectively.

30 **E-6 Admission requirements**

(ASIIN 1.4; ASEA V.1, V.2)

Evidence

- Respective Chapter of the SAR
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Chap. V: Third cycle program
35

“Executive Master”, Art. 17 Admission and enrolment in third cycle programs; Annex to the SAR

- Information about the admission requirements for the degree programme on websites, in student guides etc.: Links of the Agricultural University of Tirana website :
5 <https://ubt.edu.al/sq/2021/06/18/master-ekzekutiv/> +
<https://ubt.edu.al/sq/2021/01/06/njoftim-per-hapjen-e-studimeve-ne-masterin-ekzekutiv-me-ne-planifikim-dhe-zhvillimi-ekonomik-territorial-i-zonave-rurale/> ; in Albanian Language only (Access: 18.07.2021)
- Audit discussions

10 Status of the programme

The admission criteria for the Executive Master Programme are stipulated in the Study programme regulation (Chap. V, Art. 17) and require applicants to have:

- Work experience of not less than two years in the fields of economics, urban planning, agriculture, environment, justice, civil society at both central and [local] level;
- 15 • a Master degree or “Integrated degree” (four or five years of higher education studies);
- as further selection criteria: weighted average grade of the Master or Integrated Diploma studies to be above 8.0 and not lower than 7.5; relevance of profile of Master or Integrated Diploma studies in terms of compliance with the fields and
20 programmes of the Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness (FEA); pre-determined quotas of FEA.

In addition, applicants to the Executive Master need to evidence language proficiency in one of the five official EU languages (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish) at C1 level.

25 Apart from the language proficiency requirement, the admission rules state that “the selection of the winning candidates in the program ‘Executive Master’ will be the result of the product: average grade in scientific master or integrated diploma * coefficient (according to the profile and study program that is applied); thus generating an evaluation list which announces as winners the ranking according to this list within the quotas set by the FEA”.

30 As a further requirement, the SAR invokes an interview requiring applicants to explain their motivation to study the programme and the potential extent to which successful studies may contribute to their professional career. This interview is said to be made in English or, alternatively, the foreign language the applicants speak.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The peers take note of the admission requirements as stated in the programme study regulation and the SAR. They remind the UBT of the significance of the entry conditions for the quality assurance of the programme. Thus, in principle, admission requirements shall support the intake of students appropriately qualified for a successful completion of the respective degree programme. Concerning this general guideline, the entry requirements for the Executive Master do raise some questions:

Subject-related prerequisites

The peers acknowledge that according to Albanian legislation applicants with a Master degree of sufficient excellence are principally eligible to the Executive Master. As the programme is aimed at further qualifying professionals in the field of territorial planning and development the requirement of professional experiences of a certain extent is considered adequate. This applies also to the named fields of expertise, since the target group of professionals will mostly be working in one of these areas. Otherwise, the indicated fields of work are very broad, and the related working experiences not specified any further. Apart from the national legal framework, UBT has to adhere to, the programme coordinator emphasizes the necessity to open up the programme to practitioners with very heterogeneous educational and professional backgrounds in order to effectively address the mandated reform in territorial planning and development and the demands of the labour market. Consequently, a certain degree of fundamental knowledge (for instance in economics, mathematics or statistics) is implicitly prerequisite and assumed to be achieved through prior learning. In addition, the programme coordinator and lecturers congruently argue that the applied block-teaching methodology (see also sec. E-9) supports students in quickly achieving common ground despite different background qualifications. According to this, the modules generally start with the consolidation of fundamental knowledge before gradually digging deeper into the respective subject area and successively putting theory into practice. Asked for their evaluation of the modules taught so far, the students agree to this argument. If heterogeneous educational and professional accession routes to the Executive Master were accepted for reasons mentioned above, UBT's strategy to provide students with a solid common knowledge foundation could be considered functional.

Above all, UBT stresses the gatekeeping function of the (mandatory) interview, which – besides practically evidencing the foreign language requirement – would also be employed to ensure the overall eligibility of the applicant for the Executive Master Programme. The expert panel will come back to this below.

Foreign language proficiency

With regard to the EU accession process and the role of the Albanian territorial reform in this context, the internationalization strategy of UBT and cross-border and international

job perspectives of the graduates of the Executive Master, the peers generally welcome the obligatory foreign language skills applicants have to establish. Otherwise, they would have expected English as main teaching language and proof of adequate level of English proficiency as a formal admission requirement. The C1 level in one of the official EU languages instead appears to be disparate in this regard on a first glance. Yet UBT representatives explained that the official language of teaching in the programme by law is Albanian. The request for additional foreign language mastery in at least one of the official EU languages is understood as generally recognizing the importance of language skills as well as reflecting the politically and culturally important EU accession process.

As teaching for the first batch of students is done with the support of lecturers from the partnering European universities, a considerable share of modules is de facto taught in English. According to UBT representatives, the admission interviews have been used for this batch to also ensure that applicants have sufficient English skills to follow the lectures. Moreover, reference was made to the mandatory English training in the upper secondary education in Albania. In addition, UBT convincingly refers to its offering of English and other foreign language courses supporting students in improving their language skills, if necessary. In summary, the peers received the impression that English taught modules are not an issue in the programme. In the audit discussions students attested to this, also mostly presenting themselves as being fluent in two or even more foreign languages, with English usually being one of them. This is a valuable asset of the target group of this Executive Master, which UBT should take advantage of in its internationalization strategy. Switching the teaching language of the programme to English should thus be possible in the middle run (see below sec. E-9).

Admission interview

The expert panel has already pointed out that it considers the admission interview as an important and in fact indispensable part of the admission procedure for the Executive Master Programme. UBT itself has underlined its function as a source of information on issues, which deliberately were not strictly defined in the entry requirements (such as prerequisite subject-specific knowledge, English language skills, motivation and career options). The panel understands that UBT is eager to avoid too restrictive admission rules, in order to facilitate access to the variety of professions working in the territorial planning field. Yet this decision comes with an apparent vagueness of the subject-specific admission requirements (see above). The interview as an obligatory part of the admission procedure would mitigate this vagueness and thus meaningfully contribute to ensure the quality of the admission process and ultimately reasonable admission decisions.

In view of this, the peers note that although otherwise indicated in the SAR, the study regulation did not mention the interview. Hence, it cannot be considered a legally binding part of the procedure and *strictu sensu* is at the discretion of the Faculty or Department. The

panel does not doubt UBT's intention to continue the interview the way they conducted it in case of the first student cohort. With a view to its procedural weight for the quality assurance of the admission process, however, the expert panel strongly suggests to include the admission interview (its aims and purposes) into the admission rules. In addition, as
5 with the other entry requirements, it should be publicly indicated as a mandatory part of the procedure on the Faculty website.

Recommendations

As a major source of information with respect to the students' motivation, qualification and eligibility for the Executive Master Programme, the admission interview should be a
10 legally binding part of the admission procedure.

E-7 Workload and credits

(ASIIN 2.2)

Evidence

- Respective Chapter of the SAR
- 15 • Module descriptions, Annex to the SAR
- "Methodological Note: The Quality Assurance System for Executive Master modules" (Annex 9), developed within the Project Smart AL ("Master European Innovations for a Sustainable Management of Albanian Territories, Rural Areas and Agriculture: Instruments, Policies, Strategies"), Annex to the SAR
- 20 • "Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas" (2020), Chap. V: Third cycle program "Executive Master", Art. 18 Duration of studies of the third cycle "Executive Master"; Annex to the SAR
- 25 • Decision No. 879, dated 18.12.2019 "For Some Changes and Additions to Decision No. 41, dated 24.01.2018, of the Council of Ministers, 'On the Elements of the Study Programs offered by the Education institutions of UP'"
- Questionnaire for the evaluation of lectures, practices and independent working, Annex to the SAR
- Audit discussions

Status of programme

For the design of the Executive Master Programme, the university consortium applied the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS). Overall student workload summarizing attendance and self-study time is thus presented in ECTS per module, semester and academic year. As a rule, 1 ECTS counts for 25 hours of student workload. The two-year study programme is awarded 120 ECTS, with evenly 30 ECTS per semester and 60 ECTS per study year. The ECTS size of the modules ranges between 6 (Module 11 *Territory Marketing*) and 10 ECTS (e.g. Modules 5 *EU territory and cohesion policy and Module* and 7 *Data administration and geoinformatics tools*). Credits are awarded after successfully passing the assigned exams/group works/individual research works, which contribute with different weight to the final grade for the individual module. Yet ECTS numbers and indicated workload hours are not consistent in the different documents provided (SAR / Methodological Note vs. module descriptions).

The study plan (see status description above sec. E-4) presents the overall allocation of credits and distribution of student workload per semester. However, so far neither the study plan nor the module descriptions provide an insight into how many hours students actually spent on their studies per day / week. According to the explanation of the programme designers and the programme coordinator at UBT, the specific target group of an Executive Master (mostly employed professionals) requires more flexibility in the organisation of teaching and learning. In this case, this has led lecturers in coordination with the students to flexibly arrange lectures/practical units in the afternoon and on weekends. In case of the first student cohort, the pandemic situation affecting the study organisation from the start in autumn 2020 contributed to such flexible arrangement due the limitation of study units taking place in presence at UBT.

A meaningful monitoring scheme for students' workload and thus for assessing the appropriateness of credit allocation has not been established nor implemented yet. In the questionnaire for the evaluation of modules, only one item directly refers to student workload; and this item exclusively asks about the time spent on the performance of posters/projects, which is only one share of the student workload accumulating in the module.

30 Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

In principal and on a pure formal note, the ECTS system has been employed for the Executive Master Programme in accordance with the principles of the Bologna process and the ECTS User's Guide¹¹. Inconsistencies in the numbers of credits and student working hours,

¹¹ Available on the internet: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf (Access: 18.07.2021)

which can be derived from the latest study plan as compared to the related module descriptions, may be attributed to different project implementation phases, yet need to be revised and communicated consistently.

5 The expert panel is more concerned about the scarce information it received about the actual workload burden students have to invest per day or week in their studies. This is all the more relevant, as the Executive Master is classified a *full-time* programme, which by no means is self-evident for a group of professionals already employed and in an occupation. Concerning this, block teaching instead of the linear teaching structure of regular study programmes seems to be an adequate teaching format, which moreover can be flexibly
10 tailored according to the needs of this specific student group. However, in order to evaluate whether the workload calculations for the individual modules are not only arithmetically correct, but also realistically reflecting the concrete student workload burden, the peers need to have a clearer picture of the actual distribution of lectures/tutorials, group works, self-study and individual research projects in a module per day and per week. Further ex-
15 planation on this issue should be given along with the statement of UBT/the consortium to the report.

Irrespective of this, the panel reminds UBT that a full-time study programme is simply not manageable if students are supposed to be working in parallel in their respective occupa-
20 tion (no matter whether full-time or part-time). Principally, in this case one would expect a kind of a part-time solution for both fields of activities. If UBT refers to allocating half of the time and credits to profession-related activities, ideally in cooperation with employing in-
stitutions, as a signature element of the Executive Master, this argument still requires fur-
ther explanation. If UBT claims that students study full-time, while at the same time follow-
25 ing their regular workplace activities, it needs to be clarified how UBT ensures that employ-
ers give their employees the freedom to carry out their study assignments. This could be contractually agreed on by the university and the employing institution, but would require an obligation to do so in each case in order to justify the full-time classification of the Ex-
ecutive Master.

It is this new concept of the Executive Master and its primary target group of professionals
30 as well as the flexibility it demands with respect to the study organisation and workload allocation that makes a close monitoring of the real workload of students indispensable. Calculations of workload and credit allocation in the programme under consideration have reportedly been based on previous experience, probably for the most part in regular study
35 programmes. However, no valid experiences exist for Executive Master Programmes in Al-
bania in general nor for this one specifically. Hence, a viable monitoring scheme should be established in order to enable adaptations in the credit point allocation or a revision of module contents should significant discrepancies occur.

Request for additional information (along with the statement to the report)

Provide further explanation regarding the distribution of student workload, in particular concerning the Executive Master's claim to be a full-time study programme.

Recommendations

- 5 A viable monitoring scheme for student workload should be put in place in order to allow for timely adjustments in case of significant discrepancies between credit allocation and workload calculation.

E-8 Examination and supervision

(ASIIN 3; ASEA III.5, III.6, III.8; V.1, V.2)

10 **Evidence**

- Respective Chapter of the SAR
- Module descriptions, Annex to the SAR
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Chap. VIII, Knowledge Assessment, Annex to the SAR
- 15 • Sample of examinations, case studies and posters provided by UBT for inspection of peers
- Audit discussions

Status of programme

20 According to the documents, students are subject to three types of assessment: continuous assessment, practical files (resulting from individual research projects) as well as final examinations. Intermediate testing – in the terminology of the Study programme regulation (Art. 36) – is a typical form of the continuous evaluation and in the module descriptions is referred to as “midterm examination”.

25 Main forms of the regular assessment then are the “practical files” (practical works to be done in almost all modules) and the final examinations. The practical files as well as the Diploma thesis are strictly defined formally and substantially in the study programme regulation (Art. 36 No. 3f. and 10f.). Practical files have to be submitted and presented in the last week of the semester; comprehensive information about this work shall be given at
30 the start of the modules (Art. 36 No. 4g)). Final examinations could be conducted in written form, orally or in a combined mode; they are scheduled in predefined examination periods. These various components of the assessment are adding up with different percentage

shares to the evaluation of the module (final grade). While continuous evaluation shall be representing 10 to 30% of the total evaluation, the practical file shall be attached at least 50%, leaving the final examinations with a weight of 20% at a minimum and 40% at a maximum (Art. 35 in concordance with the indications in the SAR). Module descriptions for the Executive Master however demonstrate deviations from these guidelines (for instance Modules 2, 5, 10). Examination schedules have to be communicated to students at least four weeks before the start of the semester (Art. 36 No. 7).

According to the statements of UBT representatives, the Diploma thesis could be conducted at UBT but also externally in cooperation with employers or potential partner institutions of the university. In any case, UBT or the Faculty take full responsibility of the theses, their supervision and evaluation – as the programme coordinator explicitly confirms and Art. 36 No. 10 Study programme regulation implicitly states. Apart from that, no practical guideline for the thesis procedure exists by now.

The study programme regulation entails detailed rules for the organisation, conduct, re-sit, and grading of modules as well as the conditions for admission to examinations and progress from the first to the second study year. In addition, the regular examination periods, the appeal process and the option for improving grades are elaborated there (Art. 38, 44 and 45 respectively).

The expert panel has been provided with a sample of case studies (“project files”), examinations and “posters” during the audit for their inspection and evaluation of the level of qualification.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The peers acknowledge that there is a variety of assessment methods across the curriculum and even on the level of the individual module. Principally, they have the impression that the assessment forms are chosen with a view to the intended learning outcomes and contents of the modules thus adequately reflecting the degree to which theoretical knowledge conveyed in the lectures is readily available for utilization. Yet, the expert panel also sees that the continuous monitoring of study progress across the semester puts considerable stress on students, as does the requirement to submit and present all practical files more or less simultaneously at the end of the semester. While there is some benefit in the continuous assessment, which might encourage constant learning and, in the long term, facilitate a better understanding of the acquired theoretical knowledge, its adequacy might be questioned with respect to the usually elder students with continued occupational obligations. Moreover, as this examination concept would be demanding even for regular students, it is especially challenging for employed professionals already spending a considerable amount of time for working assignments besides their studies.

With respect to examinations of the first semester, the students did not complain their examination load. Yet the fact that some of them underlined the demanding (though generally bearable) assessments and indicated the tough timeline for the project files could be seen as a warning signal. The panel therefore suggests considering whether the coordination, scheduling and/or the number of assessments could be optimized within the existing legal framework. In addition, monitoring the number, allocation and distribution of the various forms of assessments in the frame of the module evaluations could serve as a marker of alarming trends in this respect. Hence, the experts encourage UBT to think about elaborating its quality assurance system accordingly.

10 The expert panel strongly agrees to the extraordinary relevance of the practical files for the Executive Master and its professional student clientele. These practical works do not only encompass roughly half of the module workload and awarded credits, but also reflect the application-orientation of the programme and its close inclination to the professional world. In this context, it could also be stated that the exemplary case studies, posters and
15 examinations the peers had the opportunity to inspect are of good quality and fit their expectations with regard to level and content.

Regarding the Diploma thesis, the expert panel appreciates the general aim to carry out these works in cooperation with employing institutions, organisations or businesses while keeping up the full responsibility of UBT/the Department for the guidance, supervision and
20 evaluation of these works.

Principally, the experts appreciate the elaboration of a comprehensive regulation for the assessment of study achievements. Notwithstanding this, the inner logic and systematic of the study programme regulation appear to be impaired to a certain degree. Obviously, most of the provisions in the document “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” are
25 valid for all degree programmes offered by the DEPRD.¹² The study programme regulation starts with “General Provisions” (Chapter I) although seemingly many more “general provisions” follow. In between, specific provisions for the Executive Master are inserted (Chapter V) followed again by general provisions for all study programmes of the Department.
30 The regulatory document ends with an empty chapter of “Special Provisions” (Chapter XIV), where those regarding the Executive Master would have been expected and probably best placed. Inconsistencies regarding the contribution of the various components of assessment to the final grading (Art. 35 No. 1 vs. indications in module descriptions) may be attributed to this unclear structure of the regulation. Obviously, other provisions as well do
35 not apply to the Executive Master and leave room for further specifications with respect to this third cycle programme type. The experts expect that the programme coordinator and

¹² In addition, superordinate regulations on the UBT and FEA level are referred to and have to be kept in mind.

responsible bodies of the Department will work on the consistency of the relevant study provisions of the executive Master and in this sense subscribe to Art. 2 No. 3 of the study programme regulation presenting it as “a ‘living’ document, special aspects of which must be completed in time”.

5 **Recommendations**

It should be considered whether the coordination, scheduling and/or the number of assessments could be optimized within the existing legal framework in order to facilitate the achievement of the learning outcomes.

E-9 Didactical methods

10 (ASIIN 2.3; ASEA III.2)

Evidence

- Respective chapter of the SAR
- Module descriptions, Annex to the SAR
- Relevant results from internal surveys and evaluations : Lessons learnt, Annex to the SAR
- Audit discussions

Status of programme

In line with the characteristics of the Executive Master Programme, the teaching methodology aims at balancing face-to-face study and study in a professional environment. Thus, according to the SAR the teaching instruments applied in the programme shall in the first place pay attention to the needs of the students in their daily work. Practical files as application-oriented individual research assignments therefore make up for a major part of the student workload and credit distribution as well as for the final grading of the modules. The decision about the appropriate teaching/learning tools in a module in the account of the SAR depends on the module topics and is up to the deliberation of the lecturers. Consequently, different instruments such as modelling, topography, questionnaires etc. may be employed in individual or group assignments and presentations. On request, the programme coordinator, lecturers and students congruently confirm that project-style group works are divided up into individual assignments assessed separately within the frame of collective oral presentations.

Adapting teaching to real-life scenarios and professional environments also determines the module-specific division between onsite teaching, practical work and self-study of students. To illustrate this, the SAR states e.g. that for the GIS module most of the teaching is

planned in a computer lab, while for the Natural Resources and Environment Economy module the most important part of the personal and professional work would be linked to the modelling of real problems of natural resource management in Albania.

5 A further significant element of the didactical methodology of the Executive Master Programme is the stepwise progressing in the delivery of theoretical knowledge from consolidating fundamentals to conveying advanced knowledge in the subject-related fields. This approach is combined with a block-teaching method, in which – contrary to linear teaching in regular study programmes – the modules are not presented in parallel but consecutively across the semester. In the view of UBT, this pedagogical concept facilitates a more thorough and sustainable learning of students, while at the same time ensuring that all students
10 have the knowledge necessary to successfully pass the module. In addition, redundancies shall be diminished and complex coordination efforts during the semester saved.

The audit discussions made it clear that in the pandemic situation lecturers generally switched from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Reportedly, real-time as well as
15 recorded teaching formats were practiced.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The variety of teaching formats and instruments and in their connection with the professional environments of the students is considered an undeniable strength of the Executive Master. This asset directly contributes to the achievement of the educational objectives for
20 this new type of third cycle programmes. It also encourages the students' active participation in the teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, the peers consider the two-level approach of teaching in the modules (progression from consolidated fundamentals to advanced knowledge) in combination with the block-teaching structure another aspect especially fitting the learning needs of the specific
25 student group. The pedagogical strategy takes into account that students, who mostly will be disconnected with an ongoing formal educational process and, moreover, remain in the employment and occupation during the time of their studies, have different teaching needs and develop different learning strategies. The design of the programme and its implementation at UBT has convincingly undertaken to cope with this challenge.

30 Additionally, it is positively noted that the programme has successfully managed to swiftly adapt to an online mode of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences with different e-learning elements have been gathered and – as students confirmed – successfully implemented. In the further development of the programme, these methods might at least partly be continued and combined with onsite lessons. As the audit discussions reveal, this might improve the compatibility of study, family and employment from
35 the students' perspective and likewise alleviate the inclusion of stakeholder and visiting professors in the programme implementation. Otherwise, the expert panel agrees to the

opinion of both students and lecturers that class teaching should be the backbone of the programme and, with regard to specific modules like the GIS module, is in fact irreplaceable. Nevertheless, the peers recommend keeping up proven elements of online teaching in a mixed teaching/learning structure.

- 5 The experts understand the absence of an explicit “window of mobility” within the curriculum of the programme. The organisation of study units abroad or even to other universities in the country will be especially challenging for employed students with concrete obligations within their respective occupation. However, the manifold actual and potential stakeholders national and international, not least in the neighbouring countries of Albania, 10 may open new opportunities in the future.

The panel therefore considers further efforts to this end commendable. The already mentioned suggestion to gradually switch to English as main teaching language would also support the students’ ability to conduct study visits abroad and enlarge their (international) job opportunities.

15 ***Recommendations***

Elements of online teaching successfully applied during the Covid-19 pandemic should be maintained in order to alleviate the engagement of visiting lecturers, the flexibility of teaching organization (also for the students with regard to their professional obligations) as well as the sustainability of teaching and learning.

- 20 It is recommended considering means to facilitate student mobility nationally and abroad within the curriculum of the programme.

With a view to fostering the internationalization of the programme as well as broadening the job opportunities of graduates, English should be established as main teaching language. (see sec. E-6, E-11)

25 **E-10 Guidance and support services**

(ASIIIN 2.4; ASEA II.7; V.8)

Evidence

- Relevant chapter of the SAR
- Audit discussions

30 **Status of programme**

Pursuant to the SAR, the “Students and careers” office at UBT shall be the students’ prime source for information and advice. In addition, a department secretary shall be at the disposal for students’ guidance and advice. For any study-related information, students can

access an electronic information management portal named ESSE3 (all information relating to the study progress, but also about module content, annual obligations, information about the course assignments, presentations on the topics that make up the modules, as well as case studies that are treated in the learning process, other valuable information, etc.). As a similar information source, the SAR refers to the Google Classroom pages, of which the students of the FEA are automatically members. An ethics committee within UBT constituted by three professors and two students has the task to inquire into any form of inequality.

In the discussions with all stakeholders at UBT, the peers learnt that students might approach their lecturers as well as the module and programme coordinators for all questions regarding the study, study conditions, and study progress anytime during the semester.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

The expert panel takes note of the various information sources available for students as well as persons or committees at UBT/FEA, which can be contacted for guidance and support. Although apparently no specific procedures and responsibilities have been established in the course of the implementation of this new Executive Master Programme, the peers received the impression that the comparatively small group of students of this programme can rely on the support of their lecturers and the programme coordinator. Students explicitly expressed their confidence in that based on their experiences.

In addition, the electronic management and information system and the Google Classroom pages are viable instruments for these specific student cohorts as well. At this stage, the peers do not see the necessity that more or other supporting services have to be provided for the students of the Executive Master Programme. This situation might change should UBT decide to considerably increase the student number of the programme and/or its cross-border outreach or to establish more Executive Master Programmes.

Recommendations

No recommendations.

E-11 Resources

Evidence

- Respective chapter of the SAR
- “Project Proposal for Opening Study Program” (Executive Master Programme) by Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT), Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness, Department of Economy and Rural Development Policies, Annex to the SAR

- Staff CVs, Annexes to the SAR
- Video-Guide through facilities of UBT during the online audit
- Audit discussions

Status of programme

5 *Staff resources and staff development*

(ASIIN 4.1, 4.2; ASEA I.4, I.6; II.5; III.1, III.2, III.3, III.4; IV.1, IV.2; V.6, V.7)

According to the SAR, the FEA staff consist of 17 professors, 26 associate professors, 18 doctors as well as teaching support staff. In terms of structure, the academic staff is organized in twelve so-called “Teaching and Research Groups” (GMK in the Albanian abbreviation) covering almost all areas of economic studies in rural areas (management, marketing, 10 economics, statistics, applied economics, agricultural policy, rural development, finance, accounting, mathematics, and informatics). Directly involved in the programme are 10 professors, four of them full professors, six associate professors coming from different departments of the FEA¹³, as well as other faculties of UBT. Additionally, during the piloting stage 15 of transferring the Executive Master from the Erasmus+ project’s drawing board to operation at UBT, lecturers from the European partner universities of the programme are engaged as visiting staff in a co-teaching mode.

In the audit meetings, the rectorate of UBT unmistakably confirmed that the participation of the most qualified and experienced staff from all relevant academic fields is and for the 20 near future will be provided on the faculty level, but also from other faculties, if needed. Inter-departmental and inter-faculty support in providing necessary teaching services would be ensured informally.

CVs of the academic staff of the Executive Master have been available for the peers providing information about the academic qualifications, professional experience, main research 25 fields as well as publications of the lecturers involved in the programme. The five departments of the FEA, in particular the responsible DEPRD, are doing research in the subject areas of the Executive Master. The importance of the research activities of the departments is institutionally reflected through the set-up of “Teaching and Research Groups” coordinating teaching and research at departmental level (cf. Art. 3c), 6 and 7 of the study programme regulation). FEA encourages participation in collaborative research activities 30 nationally, regionally or in an even wider perspective.

¹³ FEA is constituted by altogether five departments: Agribusiness Management Department, Department of Economy and Rural Development Policies, Finance and Accounting Department, Rural Tourism Management Department, Department of Mathematics and Informatics.

Regarding the further professional qualification of the academic and teaching-scientific staff, UBT – according to the SAR – organizes specific programmes on innovative teaching methods and the use of new technologies. The knowledge transfer from the Smart AL project through the study visits of UBT lecturers at the European partner universities as well as the input of those universities into the programme is described as a significant capacity-building measure in itself.

Institutional setting, funding and equipment
(ASIIN 4.3; ASEA I.5; III.3; IV.3, IV.4, IV.5, IV.6; V.4)

Concerning the funding part, the SAR states that there are mainly two funding sources for the programme, namely the general financial resources of UBT and the registration fee of the Executive Master Programme (amounting to roughly 1.000 EUR as a one-time payment). According to the SAR, UBT is a public university funded by the Albanian state, but also entertains its own economic activities adding to the financial resources of the university. As UBT is thus subject to public financial administration and principally independent of secondary income through obligatory student fees. Regarding the Executive Master, UBT nevertheless plans to carry out donation conferences with municipalities and private businesses interested in the programme in the near future. In general, the rectorate authoritatively declared UBT's will to support and sustain the Executive Master.

Close ties supporting the development, establishment and implementation of the programme have already been built to many stakeholders nationally, in the region and on the European level. Apart from the partner universities of the consortium, this cooperation network already includes diverse Albanian ministries, high-calibre contacts to authorities of the partnering countries involved in the Erasmus+ project (e.g. Greece, France, and Germany) as well as rural planning agencies and municipalities in Albania. As the Rectorate claims in this context, formal cooperation agreements shall be concluded with all 61 Albanian municipalities. These and four times as much subordinated administrative units in Albania would provide a high demand for graduates of the programme – as representatives of Albanian municipalities pointed out in the audit meetings.

In an effort to further internationalize the programme, cross-border regional interaction shall also be intensified as the rectorate envisages.

Regarding the available facilities for the Executive Master, the SAR gives a brief account of the relevant teaching, learning and research infrastructure of UBT (lecture halls, labs, libraries, student workplaces etc.). Moreover, an information and communication lab was purchased, equipped and established at UBT in the frame of the Erasmus+ project. As stated in the SAR, the UBT facilities meet the standards, which are legally set for the purpose of Higher Education teaching and learning in Albania.

During the online audit, the peers were presented a tour through the main facilities. Due to the pandemic situation, only a small amount of teaching has been done in presence at UBT so far.

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

5 *Staff resources and staff development*

The expert panel takes note of the information provided about the teaching staff involved in the Executive Master. It positively acknowledges the remarkable programme-related expertise of the staff including the visiting professors from partner universities of the consortium. Highly valuable in the eyes of the peers are also the options of staffing this interdisciplinary Master programme with teaching personnel across the departments and even the
10 faculties of the UBT. The self-commitment of the UBT rectorate in this regard testifies to the strong commitment of the university, as does its strategic approach to third-cycle programmes of this kind in general. The support of visiting professors from the partnering universities in the implementation phase of the programme at UBT is another asset and indicative of its European perspective. Although the programme in the long term will be “nationalized” in terms of the teaching personnel, keeping up the option of exchanging lecturers with partner universities is seen as a major opportunity for quality development in both
15 the institution and the programme.

The peers are convinced that the research focus areas of the faculty and its departments
20 are also beneficial for the Executive Master. During the audit, lecturers exemplified how research questions are utilized for case studies and project works in the modules or specific research interests initiate topics and questions of student assignments. If the internationalisation is a long-term perspective of the programme – building on the consolidated national forerunner at UBT –, the network of partner universities could be an essential starting point for that, even more so when research cooperation is explicitly included into this
25 strategy for building stronger ties with partners. The peers therefore strongly suggest considering this.

In this context, the expert panel highly welcomes that UBT convincingly encourages through adequate measures and instruments the continuous development of the staff
30 qualifications in both teaching and research.

Institutional setting, funding and equipment

From the available information, the experts infer that the funding of the Executive Master is reliably ensured in the short and medium term. Financial resources of the responsible FEA for the programme do not have to be provided by revenues from student fees, but for
35 the main part are backed through the public financing of UBT.

Regarding the physical resources, the expert panel welcomes the availability of a well-equipped infrastructure and advanced facilities at UBT. Likewise, the acquisition of the information and communication computer lab for the delivery of the Executive Master with funding through by the Smart AL project is appreciable. It is regrettable that the pandemic situation caused students and lecturers to do most of the courses until the present time online, except of few practical parts at the beginning, but this will alter as soon as the situation improves.

One of the major strengths of this programme – as mentioned earlier – is the eminent cooperation network already build by the consortium and UBT. This network includes many (national and international) external stakeholders, which all demonstrated their high interest in and commitment for the Executive Master. In the experts' opinion, there would be much value in further advancing this network. This does not only apply for the partnership of UBT with the European partner universities of the consortium, but pertains especially to the targeted cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries. Greece is only the most visible and actively engaged partner in this regard; UBT representatives have convincingly made the case for similar challenges of regional planning of the territory – and hence potential partners – in other parts of South-Eastern Europe (see sec. E-4).

How cooperation of the programme in the region and above could be fostered through fully implementing English as teaching language has been pointed out at different occasions in this report (see sec. E-6, E-9). Nevertheless, the expert panel raises the issue again, also because at least in one module (Module 6) lacking English proficiency is identified as an issue for improvement in the “Lessons learnt” self-evaluation sheets.

Recommendations

The already envisaged path of internationalization of the programme should be continued. Intensifying the network and collaboration with the partner universities should play a key role. Including research cooperation into this effort could constitute a strong supplementary incentive for the partners with regard to the long-term success of the programme.

E-12 Quality management: development and enhancement

(ASIIN 6; ASEA II.6; V.5; VI.1, VI.2, VI.3, VI.4)

Evidence

- Relevant Chapter of the SAR
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Chap. XI Quality Assessment, Annex to the SAR

- Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania, available on the internet: https://www.as-cal.al/media/documents/legjislacioni/Law%20no.%2080_2015.pdf (Access: 18.07.2021)
- 5
- Questionnaire for the evaluation of lectures, practices and independent working, Annex to the SAR
 - Results of evaluations (Module 1 to 5), Annex to the SAR
 - Lessons learnt, Annex to the SAR

Status of the programme

10 The responsibilities, procedures and instruments of internal and external quality assurance of UBT and in particular for the programmes of FEA are subject to Chapter XI of the Study programme regulation (Art. 61 and 62) in connection with Chapter X of Law 80/2015 on HE in the Republic of Albania (Art. 103ff.). As required by law, UBT has devised policies, procedures and responsibilities of internal and external quality assurance of its degree pro-
15 grammes and according to the SAR informs about this via a dedicated space on the university's website. On university level a Standing Committee on Quality Assurance, Research and Research Programmes as well as an Office of Internal Quality Assurance and Institutional Evaluation have been established. As the SAR states, these institutions are in charge for the internal quality assurance at UBT in general.

20 On faculty and department level, module evaluations based on an evaluation questionnaire shall be carried out. The questionnaire has been framed by using existing templates of the partner universities with respect to the most relevant aspects of the different theoretical and practical study parts of the Executive Master. The results shall be used to remove identified deficiencies and shortcomings. As pointed out in the SAR, module evaluations are
25 conducted online ("Google Form"), then collected and analysed before the programme coordinator, if necessary, discusses with lecturers possible steps to promote the learning progress, remove obstacles and generally improve the quality of the module. No direct feedback about the results and measures derived thereupon between the teaching staff and the students is reported; this applies also to any form of a systematic and pro-active in-
30 volvement of students in the internal quality assurance.

During the audit meetings, UBT describes an annual assessment of the quality of teaching and learning through the internal stakeholders (students, teachers, etc.) as an additional instrument already introduced to first and second cycle programmes. This evaluation instrument shall also be introduced into the quality assurance framework of third cycle pro-
35 grammes like the one under consideration.

In accordance with the provisions for the internal quality assurance (Art. 61 No. 2), surveys of graduates / alumni of the programmes are required as well in order to follow up the employment opportunities and professional performance of graduates.

5 Evaluation results have been provided for only four modules and on average convey a highly positive picture. In addition to this, self-evaluation sheets (“Lessons learnt”) of the lecturers are presented for the modules conducted so far.

Analysis and Assessment

10 The expert panel takes note of the (internal) quality assurance policies, procedures and instruments as yet adapted to the Executive Master. It understands that the hitherto not fully completed transfer of the programme from the project to the operational level at UBT also affects the quality assurance dimension. The successive integration of the programme into the internal quality assurance system of UBT and FEA respectively is therefore welcomed principally.

15 This quality assurance concept is essentially based on the information provided by different evaluation instruments (module evaluation, annual evaluation of teaching and learning, follow up-evaluation of graduates’ employment and professional performance). The peers suppose that, in addition, also statistical student data such as student enrolment numbers, study progression and dropout rates, failure rates, average duration of study etc. will be systematically used and analysed in combination with the information gathered from the evaluations and surveys. This process will take some time and requires the consolidation
20 of the programme at UBT/FEA as a prerequisite.

Apart from this however, the peers see room for improvement in what they perceived as the actual state of quality assurance of the programme. To begin with, they consider the questionnaire for the module evaluations comparatively superficial, not very concrete nor
25 specifically addressing the professional student cohort of the Executive Master. Of course, open questions at the end of the short template leave room for new, wider, or, alternately, more specific aspects; yet such comments will hardly make up for *systematic* information on relevant aspects of the study conditions if not prompted by a standardized questionnaire. Moreover, the apparent lack of any obligatory feedback between lecturers and stu-
30 dents in the frame of the module evaluations will barely support the students’ confidence in this QA mechanism nor encourage their active engagement. The “Lessons learnt” feature per se is valued as a potentially fruitful means of methodical self-assessment of the teaching staff, but it cannot compensate for the former. The peers therefore strongly recommend working on these issues in the process of integrating the programme in the QA
35 scheme of UBT.

One of the characteristic elements of this programme is the strong connection of theoretical and practical parts not least implemented through the direct combination of academic

study and employed students in their professional environments. This constellation requires particular diligence in structuring university, self-study and workplace learning. Part of that needs to be a careful monitoring of the students' workload – independent of whether the programme is classified full-time or part-time. As discussed earlier, a monitoring scheme reflecting this adequately should be established (see above recommendations sec. E-7).

Furthermore, the expert panel reminds UBT/FEA on the benefits and potential of its already existing cooperation network. It should not miss out this potential in the QA of the Executive Master and more systematically take advantage of the input of these stakeholders into the quality development of the programme. As already mentioned, this applies for the internal stakeholders, too. Students, teachers, alumni, cooperating municipalities, administrative agencies, NGOs etc. should be included more systematically in the quality assurance of the programme (e.g. through an alumni-network or an advisory board with practice partners). This will contribute to keeping the programme in line with the demands of the academic as well as professional community.

Recommendations

Internal and external stakeholders should be included more systematically in the quality assurance of the programme.

Course/module evaluations should be advanced in order to more adequately reflect the characteristics of the Executive Master Programme (as opposed to regular study programmes) and to include regular feedback to students.

E-13 Documentation and transparency

(ASIIN 5.1, 5.2, 5.3; ASEA III.8; V.2, V.3; VI.5)

Evidence

- Relevant Chapter of the SAR
- “Regulation of the Third Cycle Study Curriculum Executive Program in Territorial Planning and Economic Development of Rural Areas” (2020), Annex to the SAR
- Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania, available on the internet: https://www.as-cal.al/media/documents/legjislacioni/Law%20no.%2080_2015.pdf (Access: 18.07.2021)
- Decision No 879, dated 18.12.2019 “For Some Changes and Additions to Decision No. 41, dated 24.01.2018, of the Council of Ministers, ‘On the Elements of the Study Programs offered by the Education institutions of UP’”

- Information about the Executive Master on the Project Website Smart AL; available on the internet: <https://www.smartal.uet.edu.al/> (Access: 18.07.2021)
- Smart AL Leaflet about Executive Master on UBT website; available on the internet: <https://ubt.edu.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Information-Master-Executiv.pdf> (Access: 18.07.2021)
- Module descriptions, Annex to the SAR
- Audit discussions

Status of the programme

Rules and regulations / Diploma Supplement

- 10 Major study-related regulations and provisions such as the “Study programme regulation” and the Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education are put into force and accessible for the relevant stakeholders. They do contain the relevant rules for the commencement of the study, the study progression, the organisation and conduct of the modules and examinations, the completion of studies and the awarding of the degree.
- 15 According to the study programme regulation (Art. 22 No. 3), a diploma supplement is to be issued along with the diploma. The SAR informs that the diploma supplement for the Executive Master has not been elaborated yet, but will be as a next step.

Module descriptions

- 20 Module descriptions have been provided for almost all 12 modules except of Modules 9, 11 and 12 (Diploma thesis). The descriptions provide information on the following topics:
- Content and learning objectives
 - Person responsible for the module
 - Teaching method and workload
 - Number of credits (ECTS)
 - Examination requirements and grading
 - Recommended literature

Analysis and assessment of the expert panel

Rules and regulations / Diploma Supplement

- 30 The expert panel positively addresses the effective advertising of this high-profile Executive Master vis-à-vis the students, potential applicants, and the wider public through the Smart AL university consortium. Compared to this, however, the status and transparency of the

study-related documents (regulations, module descriptions, Diploma Supplement) fall behind. Obviously, there is at least no English website at UBT comprehensively providing information about the programme, its structure and details as well as the applicable rules. Only a website with cursory information seems to exist in English so far; the project website
5 would not compensate for this, if it were to convey such study information at all (which in fact it does not).

It is understood that the Executive Master Programme is still in a pilot phase of its operation, while the project framework will soon cease to exist. Hence, some deficiencies in the substance and availability of the study-related documentation may be due to this interim
10 stage. However, the programme has started already at UBT; consequently, all study information and related study provisions must be accessible at least for the students and the lecturers. The peers learnt in the audit meetings that – in accordance with the study programme regulation – the students do get the necessary information in due time and that they feel well informed in principle. Thus, the issue at hand would be to publicly communi-
15 cate the major programme information and regulations, ideally in English language as well. In addition, the consistency of information, for instance regarding the credit and workload distribution in the different documents (study plan, module descriptions) should be revised and adapted, where necessary. Otherwise, as pointed out earlier (see sec. E-8), the expert panel suggests to reconsider the structure of the study programme regulation with respect
20 to its logic and consistency (rules generally applicable to the programmes of the Department and even the FEA, specific rules for the Executive Master, possible adaptations of general rules when it comes to the Executive Master etc.).

The peers noticed that, principally, a Diploma Supplement shall be issued, but has not been elaborated so far. This document in their understanding is an important source of infor-
25 mation about the graduates' qualifications and overall performance and helpful for third parties such as other universities or potential employers. The Diploma Supplement should be drafted as soon as possible.

Module descriptions

In the opinion of the peers, the module descriptions submitted along with the SAR present
30 themselves in an overall premature status. In general, they reveal an incoherent appearance, inconsistencies for instance of the workload and credit accounts as compared to the related information in the study plans (e.g. Modules 1 to 4), are occasionally incomplete (e.g. Module 8) or do still contain paragraphs in Albanian language (e.g. Module 1). The recommended literature could be updated in some cases¹⁴. In addition, they mostly miss

¹⁴ E.g. the description of Module 6 *Territorial Administration, planning and governance* could have made reference to: "New Leipzig Charter- The transformative power of cities for the common good", available on

out to precisely define learning outcomes in the sense of knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired by the students, which at the same time should be carefully matched against the *programme* learning objectives. As a rare exception, the description of Module 10 formulates learning outcomes (although under the heading of “Objectives of the module”). The module objectives should be differentiated from that as they regularly reflect the teaching objectives from the lecturers’ point of view.

Again, this actual state of the module descriptions might be due in the first place to the interim stage of the project. Nevertheless, the peers see much room for improvement here and strongly recommend to revise them following the above comments, add missing descriptions (Modules 9 and 11), and make the revised version publicly accessible to all interested stakeholders.

Recommendations

Module descriptions should be revised according to the indications in the evaluation report.

Study-related information such as the programme learning outcomes, module descriptions, rules and regulations should be made publicly available in English language.

A diploma supplement providing information about the graduates’ qualification profile, the structure and content of the programme, the graduates’ individual performance etc. should be drafted – in line with the related provision of the study programme regulation.

the internet: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2020/12/12-08-2020-new-leipzig-charter-the-transformative-power-of-cities-for-the-common-good; and the “Territorial Agenda 2030 – A future for all places, available on the internet: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2021/territorial-agenda-2030-a-future-for-all-places (Access: 18.07.2021)

F Commentary of the UBT and the scientific SmartAL Project Committee

The UBT (on behalf and with the assent of the scientific SmartAL Project Committee has provided a detailed statement on the (preliminary) evaluation report of the expert panel which the latter have been seriously considering for their final evaluation of the Executive Master programme in the following chapter.

In their statement, the UBT's (and the consortium) are addressing the following areas of assessment:

- Level 8 referencing of the Executive Master programme with a view to the Albanian HE Legislation and the Albanian National Qualifications Framework (E-1);
- Study objectives and learning outcomes (E-2);
- Name of the degree programme (E-3);
- Practical orientation and prospects of the labour market (E-5);
- Admission requirements (E-6);
- Workload and credits (E-7);
- Examination and supervision (E-8);
- Didactical methods (E-9);
- Resources (E-11);
- Quality management: development and enhancement (E-12);
- Documentation and transparency (E-13).

In addition to the statement, the UBT and the consortium provide the following annexes, which have also been taken into account for the peers' final conclusions in chapter G:

- Annex 1 to the Albanian Law No. 10 247, dated 04.03.2010 "For the Albanian Qualifications Framework"
- Modules descriptions fiches updated (learning outcomes)
- Règlement intérieur des formations de Mastère Spécialisé® (MS) de la Conférence des Grandes Ecoles.

G Final Assessment and Recommendations of the Expert Panel

G-1 Introductory remarks

The expert panel is thankful for the detailed statement of the UBT and the Scientific Committee that provides valuable clarifications and additional information contributing to an overall better understanding of certain evaluation issues at hand.

Moreover, the panel would like to take this occasion for some general observations, which it considers necessary in response to the prefatory notes of UBT / the Scientific Committee:

- First of all: The panel regrets that the overall and in most aspects very positive and highly estimating evaluation of the Executive Master and correspondent singular assessments obviously have been obscured by the issue of the qualifications levelling within the Qualifications Framework.

Since this is an important question, it should be stated that the evaluation report by no means generally questions the intended qualification level of this highly-profession oriented “post-master master programme”. Very much on the contrary, this perception is apparently due to a mutual misunderstanding of the actual denotation of the levelling as prescribed by the Albanian HE legislation, particularly as far as it refers to the AQF.¹⁵

- Secondly and in fact, the expert panel at no point has “called into question” the legislative framework within which the Albanian HEIs operate and actually offer their degree programmes such as the Executive Master. Rather, on the contrary, the panel is striving to pay due attention to the relevant Albanian HE legislation. Still, in an evaluation procedure – and where else if not there – it must be possible to invite even responsible political or legislative bodies to reconsider, to improve or further develop their policies or legislation on related issues.

- Thirdly, any recommendations put forward by the expert panel preliminary and/or (in the following paragraphs) finally are perceived as solely based on the international and Albanian standards underlying the entire evaluation project (see above sec. C). In this sense, the panel has undertaken every effort to provide an unbiased,

¹⁵ As indicated in the Annex 1 of Albanian Law No. 10 247, dated 04.03.2010 “For the Albanian Qualifications Framework” (Annex 1 to the Statement).

most balanced and duly justified assessment of the Executive Master programme. Any thorough reading of the report will attest to this description.

- In that respect, the expert panel has been particularly eager to not only get a full picture of the learning objectives, contents and operational conditions of this “post-master master” programme at UBT, but also to substantiate each conclusion with the information retrieved from the SAR, the audit discussions and additional background sources. Regarding this, the experts are seeking transparent and well-founded conclusions and, where applicable, related recommendations.

Likewise, strengths and potential opportunities of the programme have already been outlined wherever this is deemed adequate. Thus, for instance, the “positive aspects about infrastructure and the international commitment” of the Executive Master, which UBT and the Scientific Committee are missing according to their statement, have been highlighted more than once in different contexts (see for instance sec. E-11). Nevertheless, a concluding table assembling the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the Executive Master will be presented below in section G-3, essentially summarizing the extensive analysis of the detailed evaluation report.

As regards the (preliminary) recommendations outlined by the experts in the previous sections and individual evaluation areas, the peers notice that the UBT /Scientific Committee have already taken many commendable steps in further improving the programme. *If changes or measures are still underway but have not yet been fully implemented and intended progress has not yet been fully achieved, related recommendations will be kept as a reminder for potential stakeholders and for further utilization in the preparation of the upcoming accreditation procedure.*

G-2 Conclusions and recommendations of the expert panel

The expert panel has taken into account the statement and additional documents (annexes) of the UBT/Scientific Committee and considered this explanatory information in their final assessment and conclusions.

a) Formal and legal information

The expert panel takes note of the additional information given by the UBT/Scientific Committee regarding the attribution of the Executive Master programme to level 8 of the AQF. The panel has been discussing the issue before the given legal background and additional information of initial discussions on the same issue between the consortium and the ASIIN procedure manager. The general importance of the issue is obvious. However, as the panel was not sure about the correct legal denotation of the relevant Albanian Law on Higher

Education (Art. 77 No. 1), it asked for further clarification, which the statement has now provided.

After again delving into the AQF, the experts acknowledge that the Executive Master programmes in general are classified there as level 8 programmes.¹⁶

Table 1: AQF levels, level descriptors

AQF LEVEL	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	BROADER COMPETENCES
8	Knowledge in the most advanced level of an area of work or study, as well as in the interaction between areas	Very advanced / specialized skills and techniques including / synthesis and evaluations for critical problem solving in research and/or innovation with extension and redefinition of existing knowledge or professional practices	To demonstrate full authority, innovation, independence, research and professional integrity, continuous dedication to develop new ideas and processes in the most advanced context of work or study including research.
7	Very specialized knowledge some at a contemporary advanced level in an area of work or study as basis for original thinking and research	Critical analysis of knowledge in an area or various areas. Specialized skills for problem solving necessary for research and/or innovation to develop new knowledge and procedures as well as to integrate knowledge from various areas	Responsible for contributing to knowledge or professional practice and/or reviewing strategic performance of staff/group. Management and transformation of complex/unpredictable work/ study contexts which are and require new strategic approaches.
6	Advanced knowledge in an area of work or study including critical analysis of theories and principles	Advanced knowledge that demonstrates proficiency and innovation necessary to solve complex and unpredictable problems in an area of work or study	Taking responsibility for management and professional development of individuals or groups.

5

and qualification types

GENERAL/ TRADITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS 1	VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS 2	LIFELONG LEARNING QUALIFICATIONS 3	
Doctorate Graduate school study in Advanced Studies	Executive Master / Second Level Master / Postmaster Long-term specialisation	Study programmes for continuous education	8
Master of Science Master of Arts / Master of Fine Arts / Programme Level II study Integrated study programme of the second cycle 4-year study programme (before the enactment of the Bologna system)	Professional Master / First Level Master	Study programmes for continuous education	7
Bachelor Study Programme First Level			6

¹⁶ See AQF (p. 10f.), available on the internet: https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/aqf_brochure_en_1.pdf (Access: 16.09.2021)

Moreover, what has gone unnoticed so far, this kind of postgraduate programme is attributed to the catalogue of (advanced) vocational qualifications in contrast to the academic degrees (collected here under the rubric “General/Traditional Qualifications”). It is not part of the evaluation’s assignment to comment on this effort within the Albanian HE system to ensure a seamless transition between professional and academic career paths in the best way. Nor do the experts have to come to grips with the referencing of the AQF to the EQF – which competence rests with the EQF Advisory Group.

With a view to the indicated professional qualification, however, the expert panel subscribes to the self-description of the Executive Master by the UBT/Scientific Committee saying “that the objective of the Executive master is [...] to provide advanced information closely related to the professional requirements of the potential public [...] enrolled [...] in this study program” (Statement, p. 2). This is what the peers generally perceive as major achievement and strength of the Executive Master throughout the report (even where they see room for improvement). Beyond that, it can be stated that the profession-related knowledge, skills and competences of the graduates of the Executive Master could be considered matching the level 8 descriptors of the AQF.

Hence, with the explanations given by the UBT/Scientific committee as well as the mentioned additional findings, the expert panel confirms the classification of the Executive Master as a third-cycle and level 8 programme *according to the AQF*. At the same time, the experts abstain from grading the programme with respect to the EQF in order to not anticipate the referencing report of the EQF advisory group.

Apart from this, it appears that the experts’ preliminary assessment on the level 8 categorization of the Executive Master is essentially due to a divergent understanding of the respective benchmarking Qualification Frameworks. Since qualification frameworks are established precisely to avoid such misinterpretation and thereby facilitate cross-national recognition of qualifications, the obvious uncertainty in this case may have value in that it indicates potential difficulties in future recognition processes. At least for those not intimately familiar with the intricacies of the equivalency of professional and academic qualifications, it will not be easily understandable that in the Albanian context most Master programmes are ascribed to level 7 and second-cycle, yet some to level 8 and third-cycle qualifications – to name only this. Reconsidering the issue in this perspective might be worthwhile anyway.

b) Study objectives and learning outcomes (E-2)

The expert panel appreciates the efforts of UBT and the consortium to formulate concrete, content-related and level-adequate learning outcomes for the individual modules. These are considered appropriate.

However, the panel's respective suggestion in section E-2 of this report focuses on the *programme* as opposed to the *module* learning objectives. Although these programme learning outcomes adequately embrace the underlying comprehensive planning approach, they overall remain unclear about the concrete level of competency to be achieved. Hence, the competency level of suggested qualifications – do we speak about knowledge, methodological skills or comprehensive competences? – should be defined more precisely. The experts decide to maintain a related recommendation (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 1*).

c) Name of the degree programme (E-3)

The expert panel takes note of the UBT's/Scientific Committee's arguments for choosing the present programme name ("Territorial Planning and Economic Development"). In particular, it recognizes the formal and administrative costs coming with any effort to alter it. However, with regard to the required correspondence of the programme title and the programme content, the more comprehensive approach to territorial planning the Executive Master is aiming at in an effort to reflect the latest territorial reform and accompanying Europeanization politics of Albania appears to be not adequately reflected. Yet precisely with a view to this ambition and – no less important – the somewhat different denotation of the present title in the academic community, the experts suggested to address this wider perspective, especially the concept of integrated and sustainable regional development, in the programme name. This reasoning stands unchanged, which is why the panel still encourages the responsible programme managers to consider an adaptation of the programme name without proposing any concrete wording (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 3*).

d) Practical orientation and prospects of the labour market

The peers are well aware of the extra-ordinary scope of the profession-related activities within the new format of the professional Executive Master programme. In that sense, "fieldwork" plays an indispensable role in the programme from the beginning. However, when the experts joined the students in their preliminary assessment arguing that fieldwork should be implemented during the studies wherever possible, the term is used in a stricter sense. Students shall apply newly acquired knowledge and skills not only in work-related assignments at the workplace, but also through related activities in the "field". The experts admit the limitations the pandemic situation poses in this regard. Yet they also observe the comparatively small fraction of modules explicitly stating "fieldwork" in the module descriptions. The constructive announcements to this end in the UBT's/Scientific Committee's statement is well received and encouraged through a respective recommendation (*see below section G-3, recommendation 6*).

e) Admission requirements

It is positively noted that the admission interview to the Executive Master as already practised in the admission process at UBT shall be made a “compulsory phase of student selection” (Statement, p. 6). This will contribute to enrolling students fitting the prerequisites, identifying possible needs of post-qualification and ultimately ensuring the study success. Until the binding implementation of this proposition, the expert panel chooses to maintain a recommendation to this end (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 7*).

f) Workload and credits (E-7)

The expert team understands that the ECTS has been employed for this Executive Master programme based on prior experience from lecturers of the UBT/consortium as it is the first programme of its kind to be established in an Albanian university. However, from the comments of the UBT/Scientific committee – and apart from the indications in the module descriptions – the experts do not receive a more reliable picture about the actual workload of students per day, week and semester. With regard to the adult student group of professionals with an academic background, who in most cases will have different learning needs and learning strategies as compared to regular full-time students, the experts consider it indispensable to thoroughly monitor the student workload. This purpose could be best served through establishing an appropriate workload-monitoring scheme, for instance by conducting a workload-survey on a cyclical basis or including a section of related questions into the already practiced module evaluations – as envisaged in the statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee (Statement, p. 7). With a view to the latter, the expert panel confirms a modified recommendation (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 15*).

The most urgent question in this respect is the alleged full-time status of the Executive Master programme. As the experts pointed out in the report, a full-time availability of students for their studies is simply impossible if they at the same time stay in their individual occupations to whatever extent. If students are supposed to continue their occupational activities, there needs to be some sort of a reliable arrangement between the UBT/faculty and the employers for each of them. The expert panel therefore appreciates the expressed willingness of the programme coordinators to consider setting up a sample contractual agreement between the university and the employing institutions (cf. Statement, p. 6) ensuring the students availability for studies while in parallel working in their occupation. It should be repeated that this is only one possible solution for the dilemma situation; others might be pondered as well, if they deem the UBT/Scientific committee more expedient. The panel nevertheless suggests adding a recommendation to this end (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 16*).

g) Examination and supervision (E-8)

The peer panel takes note that the programme coordinators have already reconsidered the scheduling of the theoretical and practical parts of the Type B modules as well as the related continuous assessment, in particular the so-called practical files. The proposed
5 scheme of four weeks work on the modules and altogether three weeks for the practical files (one week for each of them per semester) appears to be a plausible strategy to distribute the student workload in a more balanced manner. Especially the proposition that students shall no longer be required to return their practical files at the same time directly addresses a complaint of students during the audit and is thus considered responsive to
10 their needs. Since the proposed modification is not yet implemented, the experts decide keeping up a slightly adapted recommendation as a reminder (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 8*).

h) Didactical methods (E-9)

The expert panel takes note of the programme coordinator's indication that mobility options for graduates of the Executive Master programme so far are considered impractical
15 due to the present lack of comparable programmes at other universities (nationally and internationally). The experts do not fully agree to this perception, since the recognition rules of the Lisbon Convention provide ample opportunities to acknowledge academic achievements at other universities as long as these could be regarded "as equivalent"¹⁷.
20 Consequently, the existence of fully compatible professional third-cycle programmes at other universities is not seen as a necessary condition for the mobility of the students of the Executive Master. It is rather for reasons of their simultaneous professional activities that they might find it difficult to spend some time at another university. Still, the experts acknowledge and encourage the general constructive approach of UBT to enhance the mobility perspectives within its internationalization framework. In order to underline this, they
25 confirm the originally formulated recommendation (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 10*).

i) Resources (E-11)

The peers positively note the planned or already bindingly implemented cooperations between UBT and European partner institutions, in particular with regard to the possible co-supervision of thesis works – as they already did in their previous assessment. Nevertheless, they would like to stress the manifold opportunities of enriching this cooperation network beyond the close circle of the consortium member HEIs. The panel therefore explicitly

¹⁷ That is to say as long as no major deviations from the intended learning outcomes of the modules/courses to be substituted can be identified.

endorses the strategic networking perspective of the UBT with an additional focus on research cooperation also benefitting the Executive Master programme (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 12*).

j) Quality management: development and enhancement (E-12)

5 The expert panel positively notes the UBT/Scientific Committee plans to revise the present module evaluation questionnaire in order to better reflect the study conditions and learning process of a student group of employed professionals. Likewise, indications to also include a section of questions regarding the workload of students are explicitly supported (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 14*).

10 Obviously, a misunderstanding occurred when the experts critically address the “apparent lack of any obligatory feedback between lecturers and students in the frame of the module evaluations”. This observation – confirmed by the students during the audit discussions – does not refer to the assessments, but rather to the feedback, the lecturers are giving the students about the results and (possible) follow up-measures of the students’ evaluation
15 of the individual modules. The expert panel is still of the opinion that this feedback cycle and thereby the students’ confidence and active engagement in the existing QA system should be strengthened (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 14*).

k) Documentation and transparency (E-13)

As already stated, the experts know that this Executive Master, which has started at UBT
20 only recently and presents itself in an entire new teaching/learning format, is still in its transition phase. Some deficiencies regarding particularly the transparency of the study-related documents must be ascribed to this situation. However, with the start of the programme at UBT in 2020 the relevant information, especially study and exam provisions, must be accessible to all stakeholder, above all the students. The panel is thankful for the
25 programme coordinator’s confirmation that all relevant documents and information are available on the UBT website in Albanian language, which is in line with the finding that students in general feel well informed about the Executive Master. This notwithstanding, the experts recommend (not least with a view to the internationalization strategy of UBT) that the information should be provided and publicly available in an English version as well
30 (*see sec. G-3, recommendation 17*). It is acknowledged though that the university is already on track in this regard.

The experts take note of the fact that the provision of a Diploma Supplement (DS) depends on the availability of a draft DS template for the Executive Master to be provided by the ministry. They nevertheless regard the respective recommendation reasonable as the ex-
35 istence of the DS will have to be checked in an upcoming accreditation procedure – in accordance with European and Albanian standards (*see below sec. G-3, recommendation 18*).

Regarding the module descriptions, the experts see the progress being made in drafting appropriate module learning outcomes. Overall, the latter reflect the module contents and relate to the programme learning objectives. The expert panel trusts that the module descriptions will be revised on a cyclical basis – as indicated in the Statement of UBT/the Scientific Committee –, thus successively removing also minor deficiencies mentioned in this report. Therefore, the related recommendation appears to be dispensable and, consequently, has been waived by the experts.

G-3 SWOT table and recommendations

Major characteristics of the Executive Master programme under review are summarized in the following SWOT table:¹⁸

Strengths	Weaknesses
_Consequently build on the educational backgrounds and needs of specialised professionals in the area of planning, developing and managing territories (E-1)	_Inaccurate formulation of level of competency in defining the <i>programme</i> learning objectives (“qualification profile” of graduates) (E-2)
_Integrated regional development approach translated into an interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary and multi-focal curricular perspective (E-3, E-4, E-5)	_Name of the Executive Master programme (E-3)
_Curricular concept of the programme, including aspects of social integration and environmental sustainability (E-4)	_Imbalance of major dimensions in the planning field (economic, ecological, social, cultural and political) in the curriculum (E-4)
_Highly profession- and application-oriented combination of theoretical and practical study units (E-4, E-5)	_Strengthening of fieldwork <i>strictu sensu</i> , not just relating to the general combination of study and workplace activities (E-5)
_Variety of teaching formats and instruments convincingly connecting with the professional environments of the students (E-8)	_Admission rules not bindingly although de facto including an interview, in which the academic, professional and personal backgrounds of the applicants are checked (E-6)
_Assessment methods taking up field-related problems and assignments, especially in the “practical files” and in the “Diploma thesis” (E-8)	_Missing organisational/contractual guarantees for the students’ study time during their ongoing occupational activities (E-7)
_Successful and efficient adaption of the teaching/learning process to the restrictions of the pandemic (E-9)	_Lack of reliable monitoring scheme for student workload (E-7)
_Availability of physical resources and advanced facilities of UBT for the Executive Master (E-11)	_QA system with regard to poorly developed active student participation and involvement (E-12)

¹⁸ Numbers in brackets refer to sections of the present report, in which the individual characteristics are elaborated.

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_ Commitment of the UBT rectorate and the responsible faculties, but also of the Albanian government as well as the responsible ministries (E-4, E-11)	
_ Cooperation with a European consortium of universities with proven expertise in all planning-related areas (E-4, E-11)	
Opportunities	Threats
_ Job market opportunities for professionals from all ranks of territorial planning and management as well as rural and regional development (E-4, E-5)	_ Future of Albanian accession process to EU and its influence on the HE policies, in particular regarding the support of the government/line ministries for this Executive Master [E-4]
_ Long-time process of the “Europeanization” of the Albanian planning culture serving as a backbone for a sustained demand in the skills and competences of Executive Master graduates (E-5)	_ Decreasing support by national and international stakeholders when the new Executive Master format ceases to be an innovatory asset of HE [E-11]
_ Programme serving as a role-model and front-runner attracting also international students and potentially spurring the internationalization policy of UBT (E-4)	_ Broadly defined admission criteria potentially undermining the prerequisite competence level of students and potentially compromising the achievement of the learning objective (E-6)
_ Enhancement of the programme through cross-border interaction and networking thereby addressing the challenges of diversity and different planning systems (E-4, E-11)	_ Disappearance of flexible arrangements in teaching and learning developed during the crisis situation of the Covid-19 pandemic (E-9)
_ Combining proven e- and distance learning tools with traditional classroom-based learning (E-9)	_ Inconclusive integration of study rules for the Executive Master programme(s) into the general study and exam provisions of UBT complicating their comprehensibility and affecting their transparency (E-7)
_ Opening new opportunities for student mobility through the regional cross border interaction and cooperation (E-9)	
_ Strengthening the internationalization of the programme through the continued engagement of visiting professors from partner universities (including the consortium members) (E-11)	

On the basis of the SAR, the audit discussions, the statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee as well as additional documentation submitted along with the statement, the expert panel considers the Executive Master on a good way to matching the Albanian (and European) quality standards.

Taking into account the planned, proposed or already implemented modifications, the experts recommend as follows in an effort to thereby contribute to the quality development of the Executive Master programme:

Recommendations

Concept and content

5 R1 The programme learning objectives should be revised in order to specify and concretize the intended knowledge, skills and competences in the respective field. They should be made publicly available to all interested stakeholders. [E-2]

R2 Feedback of stakeholders should be requested on a regular basis in order to evaluate the adequacy of the learning objectives as well as the design of the programme and adapt them, if necessary. [E-2]

10 R3 The name of the programme should be re-considered in order to better reflect integrated and sustainable regional development as a broader framework. [E-3]

R4 With regard to the concept of “Integrated Regional Development” further efforts should be undertaken to better balance the major dimensions in the planning field (economic, ecological, social, cultural and political). [E-4]

15 R5 Cross-border interaction and cooperation should be strengthened in the course of the further development of the programme, thereby addressing the challenges of diversity and different planning systems in border regions. [E-4]

R6 A reasonable amount of fieldwork and, in general, project orientation should be a major focus of the teaching mode in order to raise the professional competences of the graduates effectively. [E-5]

20 *Admission*

R7 As a major source of information with respect to the students’ motivation, qualification and eligibility for the Executive Master programme, the admission interview should be a legally binding part of the admission procedure. [E-6]

Learning and Teaching

25 R8 The coordination of the Type B modules and the provision of the related practical files shall be implemented as proposed in the statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee. [E-8]

30 R9 Elements of online teaching successfully applied during the Covid-19 pandemic should be maintained in order to alleviate the engagement of visiting lecturers, the flexibility of teaching organization as well as the sustainability of teaching and learning. [E-9]

R10 It is recommended considering means to facilitate student mobility nationally and abroad within the curriculum of the programme. [E-9]

Internationalization

R11 With a view to fostering the internationalization of the programme as well as broadening the job opportunities of graduates, English should be established as main teaching language. [E-9]

5 R12 The already envisaged path of internationalization of the programme should be continued. Intensifying the network and collaboration with the partner universities should play a key role, and including research cooperation into this effort could constitute a strong supplementary incentive. [E-11]

Quality Assurance

10 R13 Internal and external stakeholders should be included more systematically in the quality assurance of the programme. [E-12]

R14 Course/module evaluations should be advanced in order to more adequately reflect the characteristics of the Executive Master programme (as opposed to regular study programmes) and to include regular feedback to students. [E-12]

15 R15 A monitoring scheme for student workload as proposed in the consortium's statement of the UBT/Scientific Committee should be put in place in order to allow timely adjustments of significant discrepancies between credit allocation and workload calculation. [E-7]

20 R16 UBT should develop and put in place a viable means to enable a successful combination of studying the full-time programme and a professional occupation. [E-7]

Transparency

R17 Study-related information such as the programme learning outcomes, module descriptions, rules and regulations should be made publicly available in English language. [E-13]

25 R18 A diploma supplement providing information about the graduates' qualification profile, the structure and content of the programme, the graduates' individual performance etc. should be drafted – in line with the related provision of the study programme regulation. [E-13]