

BEYOND THE DIPLOMA: ROMA STUDENTS AND THE TRANSITION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Abstract

In recent years, increasing numbers of Roma students in Kosovo have gained access to higher education, representing a significant step forward in the struggle for equality and social inclusion. Yet educational attainment alone does not guarantee successful integration into the labour market. Research from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) demonstrates that Roma communities continue to face disproportionate levels of unemployment, poverty, and labour market exclusion. This article examines the transition of Roma students from higher education into employment in Kosovo, combining statistical evidence with the experiences of Roma students themselves. It argues that while educational access has improved considerably, structural barriers continue to hinder labour market participation. The article further explores the importance of internships, mentorship, professional networks, and inclusive recruitment practices in transforming educational achievements into meaningful careers.

Introduction

For generations, education has been viewed as one of the most powerful tools for social mobility. Across Europe, educational attainment has often been presented as the primary pathway through which Roma communities can overcome poverty, exclusion, and discrimination. In Kosovo, considerable efforts by public institutions, international organizations, and civil society have helped increase access to education for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. As a result, more Roma students are attending university than ever before.

This progress represents a remarkable achievement. Only a generation ago, university education remained inaccessible for many Roma families due to economic hardship, discrimination, and systemic barriers. Today, Roma students are studying business, public policy, law, education, information technology, medicine, and social sciences. Many are becoming the first university graduates in their families.

However, an important question remains: what happens after graduation?

While much attention has been devoted to increasing educational participation, considerably less attention has been given to the transition from education to employment. The evidence suggests that educational inclusion has advanced more rapidly than labour market inclusion. As a result, many Roma graduates continue to face significant challenges when attempting to convert educational success into professional opportunity.

The future of Roma inclusion in Kosovo therefore depends not only on increasing the number of university graduates but also on ensuring that those graduates can access meaningful employment and sustainable careers.

Educational progress and persistent labour market gaps

The educational situation of Roma communities in Kosovo has improved substantially over the last two decades. Scholarship schemes, mentoring programs, tutoring initiatives, and support from organizations such as Roma Versitas Kosovo (RVK) and Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (VoRAE) have enabled increasing numbers of students to pursue higher education.

Yet research consistently demonstrates that educational improvements have not been fully matched by labour market outcomes.

According to the International Labour Organization's study *Perspectives of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Youth on Decent Work Opportunities and Challenges in Kosovo*, unemployment among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities was estimated at approximately 49 percent. Even more concerning, around 78 percent of young people from these communities aged 18–24 were classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), one of the highest levels of youth exclusion identified in the region.

These figures are particularly significant because they demonstrate that labour market exclusion begins long before individuals establish careers. Large numbers of young people find themselves disconnected from both education and employment during the critical years in which professional skills and experience are typically developed.

The World Bank has similarly argued that Roma communities throughout the Western Balkans continue to experience substantially lower employment rates and higher poverty levels than neighbouring non-Roma populations. According to World Bank estimates, improving Roma inclusion would generate measurable economic benefits not only for Roma communities themselves but also for national economies through increased productivity, higher tax revenues, and reduced reliance on social assistance.

These findings suggest that labour market exclusion is not merely a minority issue. It is also a development issue that affects economic growth, social cohesion, and the effective utilization of human capital.

Why is education not enough?!

The assumption that education automatically leads to employment is not always supported by reality.

Research conducted by the ILO identified several interconnected barriers affecting Roma youth during their transition to the labour market. Among the most frequently cited obstacles were discrimination, limited professional networks, insufficient work experience, language barriers, and lack of information regarding employment opportunities.

One of the most significant challenges involves the experience paradox faced by many graduates. Employers frequently seek candidates with previous work experience, while recent graduates require employment opportunities in order to gain that experience. This challenge affects many young people, but it can be particularly severe for Roma students who may have fewer opportunities to access internships, mentorship programs, and professional networks during their studies.

The OECD has similarly highlighted that youth across the Western Balkans often face difficult transitions into employment due to skills mismatches, limited opportunities for practical training, and weak connections between educational institutions and employers. For Roma students, these general

challenges are often compounded by additional barriers linked to ethnicity and socio-economic disadvantage.

Language also remains an important factor. In some communities, Roma students from Serbian-speaking environments encounter difficulties accessing employment opportunities in Albanian-speaking institutions and workplaces. Such barriers can significantly reduce the range of opportunities available to otherwise qualified graduates.

For Roma women, the situation can be even more complex. Studies conducted by UNDP and the ILO indicate that young women frequently face multiple layers of disadvantage related to gender, ethnicity, family expectations, and labour market participation. Early marriage, caregiving responsibilities, and economic hardship can further limit opportunities for education and employment.

Discrimination and the hidden Costs of Exclusion;

Perhaps the most difficult barrier to measure is discrimination.

Although Kosovo possesses a legal framework that prohibits discrimination and guarantees equal opportunities, many Roma job seekers continue to report experiences suggesting unequal treatment during recruitment processes.

Research conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights demonstrates that Roma communities throughout Europe continue to face significant disadvantages in employment compared to majority populations. Even where educational attainment improves, labour market outcomes often remain unequal.

Discrimination does not always appear in obvious forms. It may manifest through unconscious bias, stereotypes, reduced expectations, or informal recruitment practices that favour individuals already connected to professional networks.

The consequences extend beyond individual careers. When qualified graduates encounter barriers unrelated to their abilities, societies lose valuable talent, institutions become less representative, and economic potential remains unrealized.

VOICES OF ROMA STUDENTS

The experiences of Roma students themselves illustrate both the challenges and aspirations that characterize the transition into the labour market.

Raim Butic, a student at the International Business College Mitrovica (IBCM), is completing his degree in International Sales and Marketing and preparing to enter professional life.

“As I am finishing my degree in International Sales and Marketing, my goal is to start a career as a sales representative, marketing specialist, or business development professional, where I can apply my knowledge, gain practical experience, and continue developing professionally.”

When discussing the transition ahead, Raim emphasizes both confidence and realism.

“I believe my biggest advantage is my adaptability, communication skills, and willingness to learn, while my biggest challenge will be transitioning from academic studies to the expectations and competitiveness of the labour market.”

His reflections capture a concern shared by many graduates: the gap between educational achievement and practical experience.

Almedina Skenderi, a student at RIT Kosovo, approaches the issue from a broader perspective.

“My wish is to see discrimination against Roma people stopped by the younger community. I hope young people learn to think for themselves instead of following harmful stereotypes or the opinions of the majority.”

For Almedina, labour market inclusion is inseparable from social inclusion.

“I dream of a future where questions about Roma people and the labour market no longer feel necessary because inclusion and respect are already normal, and I can simply live as a normal Roma girl in society.”

She also identifies barriers that often receive limited attention in public discussions.

“One of the biggest challenges Roma students face when transitioning into the labour market is language barriers, since some Roma from Serbian-speaking villages do not speak Albanian fluently and struggle to access local job opportunities. Family pressures, poverty, and early marriages can also prevent students, especially girls, from continuing education or entering the workforce.”

At the same time, she recognizes important strengths that Roma students bring to professional environments.

“Many international organizations actively seek Roma and minority students because they bring valuable lived experience, resilience, and perspectives that are often missing from mainstream institutions.”

Similarly, Silvija Avdi, also a student at IBCM, highlights the importance of economic independence.

“My wishes for the future would be to finish my studies, find a stable job that I actually enjoy, and become financially independent.”

Like many young graduates, she identifies lack of experience as a major obstacle.

“I think that the biggest challenge when transitioning into the labour market is lack of experience, especially for young people, and Roma students can face challenges like stereotypes or lack of opportunities.”

Together, these testimonies demonstrate that while barriers remain significant, aspirations among Roma students are increasingly focused on professional achievement, independence, and full participation in society.

Internships and mentorship matter

One of the clearest findings emerging from labour market research is the importance of practical experience.

Studies conducted by the ILO, OSCE, and OECD consistently identify internships, mentorship opportunities, career guidance, and professional development programs as effective tools for supporting youth transitions into employment.

Internships help students gain practical experience, develop workplace competencies, and establish professional contacts. Mentorship provides access to guidance, advice, and networks that many first-generation university students may otherwise lack.

These mechanisms are particularly important for Roma students because they help compensate for structural disadvantages that cannot be addressed through education alone.

Programs implemented by Roma Versitas Kosovo illustrate the importance of this approach. By combining educational support with leadership development, mentoring, internships, and professional networking opportunities, such initiatives help students prepare not only for graduation but also for successful careers.

My perspective: the next stage of Roma inclusion

As a Roma student, activist, and mentor who works closely with young people through Roma Versitas Kosovo, I have had the opportunity to observe this transition from multiple perspectives.

What stands out to me is not the lack of talent among Roma students. It is the abundance of it.

I have met students who speak multiple languages, maintain strong academic records, lead community initiatives, participate in international conferences, and demonstrate extraordinary resilience. I have seen students become mentors, researchers, advocates, and role models for younger generations.

The problem is not whether Roma students are capable of succeeding.

The problem is whether society is prepared to provide equal opportunities for that success.

Too often, discussions about Roma inclusion focus exclusively on access to education. While education remains essential, the conversation must evolve. The true measure of inclusion is not simply how many Roma students enter university. It is how many graduates become teachers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, business professionals, researchers, public servants, and decision-makers.

When Roma graduates cannot convert their educational achievements into employment opportunities, society loses valuable human capital. Conversely, when they succeed, entire communities benefit.

Conclusion

The increasing number of Roma students entering higher education represents one of the most encouraging developments in Kosovo's efforts toward social inclusion. Educational progress demonstrates what can be achieved when barriers are reduced and opportunities are expanded.

However, educational inclusion and labour market inclusion are not the same thing.

Despite growing participation in higher education, many Roma graduates continue to encounter significant obstacles during the transition to employment. High unemployment rates, elevated NEET levels, discrimination, limited professional networks, language barriers, and lack of practical experience continue to shape labour market outcomes.

The experiences of Raim Butic, Almedina Skenderi, and Silvija Avdi demonstrate both the challenges and aspirations of a new generation of Roma students. Their stories remind us that behind every

statistic is a young person seeking the same opportunities, dignity, and recognition as any other graduate.

The future of Roma inclusion in Kosovo will not be measured solely by university enrollment figures. It will be measured by the number of graduates who successfully enter professions, contribute their skills, and participate fully in society.

Education opens the door. Equal opportunity determines whether people are able to walk through it.

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