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Educational Assessment in Transition: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives from Albania

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Abstract: *This article examines the evolution of assessment systems in pre-university education within a comparative context, focusing on how assessment practices and structures have transformed in Albania. It examines the gradual transition from traditional and subjective models toward standardized approaches based on scientific principles and competency-oriented frameworks. In the Albanian case, historical development is examined from the Ottoman period, through the stages of national state building and the socialist system, to contemporary reforms that include the State Matura examination, formative assessment, and digitalization through the Pre-University Information Management System (SMIP). The article also analyzes how the COVID-19 pandemic both transformed and challenged, traditional assessment models. Through a critical analysis and comparison with successful international practices, the paper argues for the need to strengthen formative assessment, expand the use of technology, and adapt personalized approaches to build a more comprehensive, objective assessment system aligned with contemporary educational requirements.*

Keywords: educational assessment; educational reform; Albania; technology in education; formative assessment

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of educational assessment is closely linked to social, cultural, and scientific developments, reflecting how societies have continuously evolved their concepts and measures of learning. In ancient cultures, assessment had an essentially pragmatic character, focusing primarily on students' practical abilities (Gipps, 1999). In ancient China, rigorous civil service examinations aimed to ensure a meritocratic administration (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 1999), while in ancient Greece, the Socratic dialogue methodology was developed, which both challenged students and

enhanced their reasoning abilities (Gipps & Stobart, 2003). The nineteenth century marked a turn toward scientific approaches in assessment, with the emergence of psychometrics as a distinct field of study. Francis Galton (1869, 1879) and James McKeen Cattell (1890) contributed to the development of tests for measuring intelligence and perceptual abilities, while Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon (1905) created the first formal intelligence test for identifying children with special educational needs.

In the twentieth century, assessment became significantly institutionalized and standardized. Spearman (1904) introduced the theory of general intelligence (g-factor), while Rorschach (1921) developed the projective personality test. After World War I, the Army Alpha and Beta tests were used in the USA for evaluating military recruits, and Thorndike emphasized the need for developing objective tests in measuring academic achievement (Popham, 2000). The contemporary period is characterized by a fundamental transformation of assessment methods, driven by technological advances. Computerized testing and adaptive assessment formats[1] enable personalization of the assessment experience according to student performance (Bennett, 2002). Simultaneously, formative assessment has gained a central role, shifting the paradigm from a process limited to measuring knowledge toward a mechanism that aims for active and continuous improvement of the learning process (Black & Wiliam, 1998).
In this way, the evolution of educational assessment, from early pragmatic practices to contemporary digital formats, reflects not only technological progress but also the transition from a measuring instrument toward an active tool that promotes and supports learning.

The Evolution of Assessment in the Albanian Educational System: From Tradition to Modernity

The history of assessment in Albania reflects a profound transformation from traditional methods of the Ottoman period to standardized and competency-based approaches of modern times. This process has reflected the country's political, social, and economic changes, transitioning from a subjective assessment system based on memorization to a system that aims for objective measurement of students' abilities and knowledge.

The Ottoman Period and the Beginnings of National Education

During the Ottoman period, Albanian education developed primarily within the framework of religious institutions, such as madrasas and mektebs, where students were assessed through memorized recitation of religious texts and interpretation of Islamic literature (Gjoci, 2022). This system lacked a standardized structure and assessment remained subjective, dependent on the opinions of teachers and religious scholars (Muceku, 2017). In most cases, education and knowledge assessment were reserved for a small elite, while the broader population remained outside the organized educational system (Kume, 2024). Formal education in Albania began

[1] Computer-based systems for measuring the performance of individuals or teams, adapting the order of presentation or the type of screen interface offered by the system, based on the user's responses or response patterns, with the aim of matching the assessment level with that of the student or team. (Clariana and Hooper 2012)

during the second half of the 19th century. The first non-religious school in the Albanian language, "Mësonjëtorja," was opened in the city of Korçë during the Ottoman period, as an effort for independence and for the protection of Albanian rights and language (Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth of Albania, 2022).

The Period of Independence and King Zog's Reign (1912-1939)

After the declaration of Independence in 1912, Albania began to build the foundations of a national educational system, where assessment began to take a more structured form. During this period, education was still fragmented and there was no unified methodology for student assessment. However, after the Educational Congress of Lushnja in 1920, foundations were laid for the standardization of assessment, introducing periodic examinations and clear criteria for measuring academic achievements (Kume, 2024). These efforts were a step toward creating a comparable assessment system across all schools, although the lack of resources and political unrest hindered the full implementation of reforms.

Education in the Communist Period (1944-1991)

During this period, with the establishment of the socialist regime, assessment was standardized and became a key tool for measuring student knowledge on a national scale. This system included numerical grades as the primary assessment mechanism, mandatory examinations for progression from one educational cycle to another, and the integration of ideological education into the assessment process (Muceku, 2017). In addition to measuring academic abilities, students were also evaluated for their engagement in political activities and productive work, reflecting the era's ideological approach to education. During the period of illiteracy in Albania, especially in the years 1945-1956, the Albanian state undertook a broad campaign against illiteracy. This was realized through the organization of intensive literacy courses, both in cities and rural areas, with the engagement of state organizations, youth groups, the Democratic Front, and Unions. Mandatory measures were established for course attendance, especially for the 12-40 age group, while social organizations played an important role in mobilizing the population (Kambo, 2005).

A primary challenge was identifying and registering illiterate citizens and ensuring regular course attendance. Various methods were applied, including awareness campaigns and pressure from state structures, to increase participation. However, various problems were noted, such as lack of coordination between institutions, infrastructure difficulties, and hesitation among certain groups, especially women and the elderly population (Kambo, 2005). The student assessment process during this period was primarily focused on mastering basic literacy skills. In most cases, final tests included the ability to read, write simple words and sentences, and perform simple arithmetic operations. In some cases, courses were organized according to a standardized program, and students who met basic requirements were provided with a certificate. Registration problems significantly affected assessment, as data on the number of participants and their progress were often inflated for propaganda reasons.

Overall, state interventions and political pressure for the success of this campaign brought mixed results, with visible improvements in literacy levels, but also with structural problems that affected the long-term effectiveness of the program (Kambo, 2005). With the political and economic changes after 1990, Albania entered a transition phase, where assessment began to be reformed to adapt to Western models.

The Transition Period and Reforms After 1990

Following the fall of communism, Albania initiated profound educational reforms. The State Matura system and new assessment methods based on European standards were introduced, albeit with implementation challenges (Bushi, 2024). The evolution of the assessment system in pre-university education in Albania has passed through several key phases, determined by legislative and methodological changes in educational policies. This system, which initially relied on a traditional approach of numerical grading, has evolved toward a competency-based model, integrating new assessment methods that aim to more accurately measure student achievements and their progress in the learning process. (Bushi & Neçaj, 2024).

Under Law No. 7952, dated June 21, 1995, "On Pre-University Education," student assessment in Albania was based on the traditional numerical grading system (Republic of Albania, 1995). This system included numerical grading on a scale from 4 to 10, where grade 10 represented the highest level of academic achievement. Another essential component was the implementation of national examinations as a mechanism for certifying student knowledge at the completion of compulsory and secondary education. Furthermore, assessment was primarily based on written tests and formal examinations, which emphasized reproduction of learned information, leaving students' analytical and creative abilities in a secondary position.

A significant change in the assessment system occurred with the enactment of Law No. 69/2012, "On Pre-University Education," which introduced a more competency-oriented and formative assessment approach (Republic of Albania, 2012). This law aimed to shift from static grade-based assessment toward continuous assessment that helped students improve their learning progressively. The reform crucially diversified assessment methods, where in addition to traditional tests, students were evaluated through portfolio assignments, projects, presentations, and active class participation. This change also aimed to harmonize the Albanian assessment system with international standards, aligning with the European Framework of Key Competencies and creating a more comprehensive system adapted to students' individual needs. (Bushi, Aliaj, & Kristo, 2024a).

Another step in this evolution was the adoption of Directive No. 34, dated September 11, 2015, by the Ministry of Education and Sports (2015), which defined the methodology for competency-based assessment in basic education. This directive formalized the concept of continuous (formative) assessment, where teachers were instructed to maintain regular records of student progress through observations and various classroom activities. Additionally, summative tests/assignments were implemented at the end of learning periods to measure student knowledge

and abilities in a more structured manner. Another innovation of this directive was the integration of portfolio assessment, which allowed documentation of student progress in a more comprehensive way, reflecting their development in various aspects of learning. In 2016, Directive No. 14, dated July 28, 2016, brought further clarification on assessment methods in upper secondary education (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2016). This document specified the combination of different assessment methods and their adaptation according to subject specificities. In particular, it emphasized the importance of implementing a flexible approach, where in addition to traditional tests, students could also be assessed through projects, scientific research, and various presentations. This change aimed to create a fairer assessment system better suited to the nature of different subjects.

The most advanced phase of assessment reform was realized with the adoption of Directive No. 17, dated July 5, 2022, which definitively consolidated the competency-based assessment system (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). This directive positioned assessment not only as a tool for measuring final results but also as an instrument for learning, transforming it into a continuous process of reflection and improvement. One of the most important points of this directive was the integration of competencies in assessment, prioritizing not only theoretical knowledge but also students' practical and analytical skills. Additionally, this directive established higher standards for transparency and objectivity in numerical grading, requiring teachers to ensure that every assessment was documented and justified. This approach aimed to eliminate subjectivity in assessment and ensure a more reliable and fair system for all students. Through this long and continuous process of reforms, the assessment system in pre-university education in Albania has transitioned from a traditional model toward a contemporary competency-based paradigm, aiming for comprehensive and sustainable development of student abilities.

Assessment System During the Pandemic Period (2020-2021)

Directive No. 13, dated May 18, 2020, approved by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth of the Republic of Albania, aimed to regulate the assessment process for students who would not be subject to the National Basic Education Examinations for the 2019-2020 school year. This decision was dictated by the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which directly affected the format of academic assessment (Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, 2020).

This directive was based on the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, specifically Article 102, as well as Article 26 of Law No. 69/2012 "On the Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania." Furthermore, it was also based on Normative Act No. 3, dated March 15, 2020, of the Council of Ministers, which established administrative measures under pandemic conditions (Republic of Albania, 2020). These legal documents legitimized the decision-making on alternative assessment of basic education students. The assessment methodology defined in the directive provided that ninth-grade students would receive an average grade from the last three years of basic education, which would be calculated based on the annual results of grades 6, 7, and 8. As the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (2020) emphasizes, such assessment aims to maintain equality among students and avoid any negative impact that might be created by the lack

of standard testing. An important aspect of this directive is the role of Assessment Commissions, which would function at regional education directorates and local pre-university education offices. These commissions were responsible for overseeing the assessment process and ensuring fairness in implementing the decision. The impact of this directive was considerable, ensuring that the assessment process aligned with the pandemic reality while protecting public health and guaranteeing sustainable educational continuity for students transitioning to secondary education. However, this decision also opened debate about the long-term effects of using such an alternative assessment method and its impact on students' future academic performance.

The Online Grading System (SMIP) was an Innovation for Albania

The Pre-University Information Management System (SMIP) is the official digital platform for managing educational data in Albania. It was put into operation with Order No. 589, dated October 16, 2023, of the Ministry of Education and Sports, and is used by all public and non-public schools offering pre-university education in the country. SMIP represents an important step toward digitalization of school administration, facilitating the processes of grade entry, record keeping, reporting, and institutional transparency (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023).

The regulation accompanying this system provides for how teachers, school leaders, and system administrators should register student data. It establishes mandatory deadlines for grade entry and defines clear tasks for each platform user. One of the most important elements of the regulation is the protection of personal data and tracking of actions in the system: every change made to grades, absences, or other data is stored with detailed information about who made it, when, and for what reason and can only be done with institutional approval (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). SMIP enhances educational decision-making by providing accurate, structured data. Institutions use this data for analysis, planning, and quality control. Additionally, the system enables schools to track student progress uniformly. This creates standardized performance reporting across the nation. Although SMIP was approved after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience of that period directly influenced the need to build such a system. During 2020, in the absence of traditional examinations, the Ministry of Education decided that the final assessment of ninth-grade students would be based on the average grades of the last three years. Supervisory committees were also created at the local level to ensure that this process was fair and uniform (Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, 2020).

These experiences highlighted the need for a system that would guarantee clarity, control, and documentation of every assessment process, even under extraordinary conditions. It is precisely in this direction that SMIP was conceived as an institutional response aimed at avoiding similar problems in the future and ensuring a fairer and more transparent approach to student assessment.

Directive No. 17, dated July 5, 2022, for Student Assessment in the Pre-University Education System (Current Directive)

To ensure a more comprehensive, objective assessment process adapted to student needs, the Ministry of Education and Sports approved Directive No. 17, dated July 5, 2022, which clearly

defines the methodology and new assessment criteria in pre-university education. In support of Article 102 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania and Article 48 of Law No. 69/2012, this directive aims to ensure a fair assessment process based on objective standards (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). According to the directive, student assessment consists of three main forms: continuous assessment, assessment with summative tests/assignments, and assessment with curricular projects. Continuous assessment includes systematic monitoring of student progress throughout the school year, through oral questions, discussions, and other pedagogical techniques. Assessment with summative tests and assignments is used to measure achievement levels at the end of key periods, while curricular projects serve to evaluate students' analytical and creative abilities in practical contexts. Articles 7 and 8 of the directive define assessment criteria for grades IV–XII. These criteria include the relative weight of each assessment component in the final grade, where continuous assessment accounts for 45% in grades IV–V and 40% in grades VI–XII, while summative tests and curricular projects account for 35% and 20%, respectively (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). An important aspect of this directive is the harmonization of formative principles with project-based methodologies, emphasizing student engagement, reflection, and self-regulation. These principles are also supported by recent research highlighting how formative assessment within project-based learning environments not only enhances student achievement but also promotes key competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Bushi, Aliaj, & Kristo, 2024a; 2024b). In particular, for students with disabilities, assessment is based on an Individual Education Plan (IEP), ensuring a personalized approach to the learning process. In conclusion, Directive No. 17, dated July 5, 2022, brings a clear and standardized structure for student assessment in pre-university education. It ensures a balance between continuous monitoring, periodic testing, and curricular projects, reflecting an integrated approach to assessing student competencies.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Strengths and Structural Limitations of the Albanian Assessment System in Pre-University Education

The assessment system in pre-university education in Albania has undergone considerable development in recent years, oriented toward standardization and increased objectivity. These efforts aim to improve reliability and equity in the assessment process. However, despite the progress made, the current structure still faces a series of limitations that affect its implementation and effectiveness.

Standardization, Transparency, and Competency Orientation: Key Achievements of the Current Assessment Framework

One of the most important developments of the current system is the standardization of assessment procedures through the State Matura, which has created a national framework for measuring student knowledge and skills. This approach has reduced subjective differences between different educational institutions, improved assessment process transparency, and strengthened the reliability of results (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022).

Another positive aspect is the increased transparency in assessment administration. The use of the Examination Information Management System (SMIP) has enabled increased objectivity in assessment by reducing the possibility of subjective interventions and improving overall process management (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). This system has facilitated assessment administration and ensured more accurate documentation of student performance.Another progressive element is the orientation of the system toward competency assessment, aiming to move from a traditional model focused on knowledge reproduction toward an approach that evaluates students' analytical, creative, and application abilities (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). This development aligns with contemporary trends in education and contributes to preparing students for the demands of modern society and the labor market.

Implementation Gaps and Pedagogical Challenges in Formative and Inclusive Assessment Practices

Although steps have been taken to improve the assessment system, practical implementation faces several structural obstacles. One of the main limitations is the lack of well-integrated formative assessment implementation. Despite its promotion in strategic documents and educational policies, it is still not effectively integrated into teaching practices due to the lack of appropriate teacher training and technical infrastructure support (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Recent research emphasizes that formative assessment is most effective when combined with structured feedback practices and opportunities for student self-evaluation, which foster learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness (Bushi & Aliaj, 2024a; 2024b).

Another limitation relates to the dominance of traditional assessment forms, which often rely on structured and memory-based testing. This approach limits the assessment of deeper abilities such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity (Muceku, 2017), making assessment less suitable for modern education objectives. Moreover, insufficient emphasis on self-assessment practices in Albanian classrooms hinders students' ability to reflect on their progress and adjust their learning strategies accordingly (Bushi & Aliaj, 2024b).

Finally, another challenge is equity in assessment: disparities in technology access across different schools create inequalities in access to contemporary assessment methods. The lack of technological infrastructure in rural areas or in institutions with limited resources constitutes a barrier to implementing advanced assessment practices (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015).

Digital Tools and Innovative Pathways: Enhancing Assessment Practices through Technology in Albania

Technological developments have significantly influenced the organization and implementation of assessment in pre-university education in Albania. One of the most important innovations is the implementation of digital platforms, such as the Examination Information Management System (SMIP), which has contributed to increased data access and facilitated student performance analysis (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). This has improved transparency, enabled more efficient assessment process administration, and strengthened the role of data in pedagogical decision-making. Another important development is the personalization of the assessment process.

Online personalized testing and adaptive assessment are new trends that can be more widely applied in the Albanian system (Van der Linden & Glas, 2010). These forms of assessment, based on advanced psychometric models, allow questions to be adapted according to the student's level, enabling more accurate assessment of individual competencies.

Another trend with great potential is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for assessment data analysis, which is also a new opportunity that can help predict student success and identify areas for improvement (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). The integration of advanced technologies creates opportunities for a more proactive and personalized approach to learning support.

However, to fully benefit from these opportunities, it is essential to further develop technological infrastructure, train teachers in the use of digital tools, and include technology as an integral component of national educational policies. In this context, the use of digital tools to manage and assess tasks such as homework assignments also plays an important role. As highlighted in recent studies, when homework is well-designed and aligned with learning objectives, it becomes a valuable tool for reinforcing knowledge, fostering independence, and supporting student achievement—particularly when accompanied by formative feedback (Bushi, Aliaj, & Kristo, 2024b).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis developed in this paper reveals that the current assessment system in pre-university education in Albania is in a phase of deep and complex transition, characterized by continuous efforts to move from traditional and standardizing practices toward a more nuanced, comprehensive, and competency-oriented approach. Although positive steps have been taken in this direction, challenges of a structural, cultural, and methodological nature continue to limit the real impact of reforms on daily teaching and assessment practice.

Among the positive aspects identified, it is worth emphasizing the increased institutional and professional awareness of the importance of formative assessment as a tool for supporting learning and not just measuring knowledge. Additionally, the progressive integration of digital tools and platforms, such as SMIP, has contributed to increased transparency, fairness, and efficiency in assessment data administration. These developments constitute an important step toward building a new assessment culture in schools. However, the main challenges facing the system relate to the non-uniform and often superficial implementation of formative practices, the lack of a clear conceptual and practical framework for assessment, and the deficit in continuous and structured teacher training. In many cases, assessment continues to be reduced to summative grades that measure reproductive knowledge, ignoring deeper aspects of learning such as reflection, problem-solving, and development of interdisciplinary competencies.

Furthermore, the benefits of new technology in assessment, such as adaptive testing, use of artificial intelligence for data analysis, or building personalized profiles for students remain largely potential, as the lack of adequate infrastructure and technical capacity limits their practical application. In this context, several strategic steps are recommended aimed at improving the assessment system in a sustainable and effective manner. First, it is essential to draft and approve a national formative assessment curriculum, which should include clear principles, practical guidelines, and concrete tools for its implementation across all cycles of pre-university education. Equally important is the institutionalization of mandatory and continuous teacher training, focusing on professional development in assessment for learning, pedagogical use of technology, and building a reflective classroom culture. Another necessary step is the expansion and consolidation of digital platform use for assessment management, using them not only for data collection but also for in-depth analysis of student performance and early identification of needs for individual or group interventions. Along the same lines, drafting a legal and institutional framework that promotes accountability and self-assessment remains a priority, including not only teachers and school administrators but also students themselves as active actors in the learning assessment process. Additionally, adapting and piloting successful international practices in the Albanian context is recommended, through guided experimentation in representative schools and analysis of their impact on student competency development. Finally, but no less important, is the promotion of a new assessment culture, where the ultimate goal is not merely certification through grades but supporting competency development, self-reflection, and student autonomy as an active subject of lifelong learning.

In conclusion, it can be said that the reconceptualization of assessment in the Albanian pre-university education system should be based on a long-term strategic vision, which sees assessment as an integral component of learning and not as an end in itself. This implies transitioning from a selective and penalizing model toward a developmental, inclusive approach oriented toward continuous improvement. The transformation of the assessment system in Albania is not merely a requirement of the times, but also a necessity to face the challenges of an educational reality in constant change. In an era characterized by digitalization, globalization, and rapid changes in labor market demands, assessment must be reimagined as a pedagogical process that helps the student understand, reflect, and build their own learning path. Only through an integrated approach, one that harmonizes standardization with personalization, technology with pedagogical sensitivity and educational policy with teaching practice, can the assessment system in Albanian pre-university education become an authentic tool for ensuring quality, fairness, and sustainable educational development.

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