



SUCCESS STORY

Kosovo's Professionals Build Skills, Earn Credentials

Certification, degrees from U.S. universities raise employment standards



Photo by: USAID

Elvin Mala (right) discusses the Transformational Leadership Scholarship Program with Kosovo's Minister of Education, Science, and Technology, Arsim Bajrami.

"Businesswise, I'm already using the new certificate. I'm speaking with an American investor," says Yll Zagragja.

January 2016 – As an information technology expert, Elvin Mala knew many employers were eager to hire workers with a specialty in IT auditing. His own employer—the Treasury Department of the Ministry of Finance of Kosovo—wanted to conduct a proper IT audit of its systems.

He looked for a program to study IT auditing, then realized none were available in Kosovo. So when he heard about USAID's Transformational Leadership Program (TLP), he applied. The program offers opportunities to study at universities in the United States for a Master's Degree or a professional certificate.

After a competitive process of essays and interviews, Mala arrived at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago in January 2015. Just five months later, he became the first program participant to return to Kosovo. "I'm looking at how to raise awareness of proper IT management," says Mala. "There are a lot of investments in IT, but little oversight."

Now he's well-prepared to perform checks on network security and protection of data against cybercrime. He wrote his research paper on how to apply ISACA (the Information Systems Audit and Control Association) standards at a government level and is now doing so at Kosovo's Treasury Department.

ISACA provides certification as a Certified Information Systems Auditor, or CISA, that's known worldwide. Mala is getting ready for the exam and looking forward to founding the first branch of ISACA in Kosovo—as soon as more professionals gain the experience and accreditation that so many employers want.

Yll Zagragja also completed a professional certificate through the Transformational Leadership Program, but he studied corporate finance accounting at UCLA. He has provided accounting services through his own company for 10 years. Now, he believes that his certificate will help enhance his credibility with foreign investors.

He says that although he has earned a professional certificate he feels people will respect it more as Kosovo's rapidly growing economy develops.

"Businesswise, I'm already using the new certificate. I'm speaking with an American investor," he says, noting that the foreign investor was more interested in speaking with him because he earned the certificate.

For his field, he is glad he pursued a professional certificate. "I know people with a Master's, and those with a professional certificate seem to appreciate it more," says Zagragja. "It's also easier to be away for a shorter time."

The goal of the Transformational Leadership Program, which ran from February 2014 through February 2019, is to increase the number of educated professionals to strengthen Kosovo's transition to a democratic, free market economy. Thus far, 167 Kosovars have participated in the program's scholarship component: 130 in Master's Degree programs, 33 in professional certificate programs, and four exchange professors with university partners. The first 11 have completed their programs and returned to Kosovo.