Forum for Educational Change - FECH

Development Strategic Plan 2026-2030 - #DEVSTRA2030

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1. Background and rationale

Forum for Educational Change (FECH) is a grassroots Civil Society Organization (CSO) founded in October 2021, aiming to contribute to the enhancement of higher education quality in North Macedonia and empower students to contribute to the local and international community through active participation in decision-making processes.

FECH is a joint venture of people of goodwill who have joined with precise goals - that North Macedonia should have high-quality public education. The students should have a voice and decision-making power when it comes to their education and future, rather than simply adhering to rules established by a select group behind closed doors, often without transparency.

We are committed to building a society where students are not just members but active participants in shaping the future of education — where public universities and other institutions serve as models of accountability, innovation, and critical thought. Professors and academic leaders should not act as defenders of political elites but as a driving force of civic integrity, inspiring students to question injustice, speak truth to power, and envision a more just society. Young people must be equipped with the tools, spaces, and opportunities to challenge the status quo, advocate for their needs, and reimagine what education can achieve for the progress of society and the nation.

Over the years, FECH has successfully initiated and implemented numerous projects aimed at empowering student assemblies, addressing corruption in higher education, offering young people in Tetovo a space to gather and implement activities, and creating coalitions such as #DigiU aimed at digitizing the public universities of North Macedonia and facilitating the establishment of the first-ever National Student Body within the country.

- The Organizational Philosophy

FECH's work is grounded in a clear organizational philosophy: that **advocacy must be driven by evidence, and activism must be purposeful, meaningful, and results-oriented**. Our methodology is based on a continuous cycle of **research, monitoring, and public action**, ensuring that every intervention we make is informed by data, rooted in real-society problems, and directed toward structural change. We believe

that ***courage is not optional***; it is essential. FECH speaks clearly, acts boldly, and confronts injustice without compromise, even when faced with intimidation or pressure.

We identify issues through multiple channels, direct reports from students, **information shared by whistleblowers**, or patterns observed in public institutions. Once a concern is identified, we initiate focused **research and monitoring efforts** to document the issue, uncover its systemic roots, and gather credible data. This evidence then informs our **advocacy campaigns**, strategic communications, and policy proposals. Whether we expose irregularities in academic advancement, track transparency in university governance, or propose digital reforms, our goal remains the same: to **translate knowledge into action** and ensure that facts lead to reform. This **evidence-based activism** distinguishes FECH as both a watchdog and an advocacy-oriented non-governmental organization (NGO).

- Political and Educational Context

North Macedonia's political and social context has significantly hindered education and youth development. Despite its foundational importance, education remains a low national priority, with only **3.3% of GDP allocated to the sector (as of Q1 of 2025)** – far below the European Union & OECD average. This inadequate investment has resulted in outdated infrastructure, limited resources, and governance inefficiencies. Compounding these challenges are systemic issues, including various forms of favoritism, corruption, and a lack of accountability, which further erode public trust in educational institutions.

Although nominally supported by the Ministry of Social Work and Youth, youth policies remain fragmented and overly sectoral, lacking a cohesive, cross-sectoral strategy. This gap has limited the potential for meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes, leaving young people without the necessary support to realize their full potential as changemakers. Geopolitical dynamics, including the stalled EU accession process and shifting international priorities, further compound the systemic instability affecting education and youth engagement.

- Key Achievements

Despite these systemic challenges, FECH has achieved several key milestones that demonstrate our commitment to addressing these gaps:

- **In October 2022**, we opened the **Youth Activism Center in Tetovo**, providing young people with a platform to share ideas, collaborate, and implement community-focused initiatives.
- **In 2023**, we launched **#DigiU**, a platform that has laid the groundwork for digital transformation in public universities. By involving more NGOs and stakeholders, we aim to further expand the digital capacity of higher education institutions.
- **In March 2024**, we facilitated the establishment of the **National Student Body**, uniting student assemblies nationwide to advocate for student needs and amplify their voices in governance.

FECH's unwavering commitment to **transparency and public accountability** has been a central component of its mission. By denouncing irregularities in public universities, such as the **illegal academic advancements in the cases of Agron Alili and Merita Mustafai**, we have underscored our commitment to upholding academic integrity and holding institutions accountable.

As we look to the future, these achievements shape the **Development Strategic Plan 2026-2030**. This plan is a call to action for stakeholders to join us in reimagining education in North Macedonia, ensuring that students are empowered, institutions are transparent, and education is recognized as a cornerstone of societal progress. Looking forward, FECH is committed to consolidating its role not only as a watchdog but as a leading **policy-shaping actor** in North Macedonia's higher education landscape

2. Internal Organizational Priorities

In addition to its external strategic priorities, the Forum for Educational Change (FECH) recognizes the importance of building its internal organizational capacity to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness. To fully execute its mission and expand its impact, FECH is committed to achieving key internal development goals over the next five years. These goals will enable the organization to operate more efficiently, increase its reach, and enhance its ability to lead educational reform initiatives in North Macedonia and beyond. The internal priorities outlined in this section are designed to serve as the operational backbone for the successful implementation of FECH's external strategic objectives, as defined in Section Three. Strengthening human resources, establishing a structured membership process, and enhancing internal governance will directly increase our organizational capacity to design, manage, and sustain complex initiatives such as the

National Student Forum, National Student Body, Research Department, the #DigiU platform, and the Stronger Student Union program.

Priority 1 - Human Resources and Staffing

Until now, FECH has operated primarily through **project-based and part-time engagement**, relying on the dedication of volunteers and short-term contributors. While this model has served its purpose during the organization's formative years, it no longer meets the demands of our expanding strategic goals. To ensure consistency, accountability, and long-term institutional growth, FECH must transition toward a **stable, professional workforce** supported by a structured internal development model.

As part of this shift, FECH will aim to employ at least 2–3 full-time staff members by 2028, supported by dedicated funding streams. A small project-writing team will be established to secure long-term funding opportunities. Furthermore, we will introduce a **structured membership process** that includes recruitment cycles and leadership pathways, ensuring that new generations of students are regularly brought into the organization's work. To guide this transition, FECH will establish a **Membership Task Force** – a rotating body of volunteers and executive board members tasked with designing an annual engagement and recruitment strategy tailored to the organization's evolving needs.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
To establish a stable, professional workforce and structured membership base that supports FECH's long-term sustainability and intergenerational renewal.	Employ at least **2–3 full-time staff members** by 2028. Create a **project-writing team** of up to 3 members. Apply for the ***Peace Corps Volunteers*** & ***European Solidarity Corps*** program to enrich the FECH with International perspectives. Develop a revised **organizational structure** aligned with international donor standards. Establish a **Membership Task Force** responsible for designing an annual recruitment and engagement strategy. Introduce a **structured membership progression system** with clear entry points and leadership pathways. Secure funding for core staff and provide **ongoing training and professional development**.	Operational continuity and improved project delivery. Increased funding success through professional grant writing. A dynamic and diverse membership pipeline that brings in new students each year. Stronger internal leadership and long-term institutional memory.

Priority 2 - Financial Sustainability

As FECH enters a new phase of institutional growth, it must build a financial model that is not only functional but resilient. During the previous strategic cycle, FECH experienced firsthand the risks of overreliance on a single donor. The sudden halt in USAID programming served as a critical lesson; **we cannot afford to keep all our eggs in one basket**. This vulnerability underscored the urgent need to diversify our funding sources and strengthen our organizational capacity to withstand external shocks.

As we expand in scale, scope, and influence, our financial model must evolve to match our ambitions. Up to now, FECH has relied primarily on project-based funding, which, while effective for piloting programs, is not sufficient for sustaining a growing organization with full-time staff, long-term advocacy goals, and regional influence. Ensuring financial stability over the next strategic cycle is therefore essential – not just for survival, but for independence, credibility, and long-term impact.

Given the North Macedonian context, **membership-based funding models and private sector donations are not viable options** for FECH at this stage. Instead, FECH will pursue **institutional grants**, **multi-year funding**, and stronger integration into **EU and international project consortia**. A transparent and auditable financial reporting system will be maintained to build donor confidence, and external audits will be introduced as part of an annual financial health review. Financial sustainability is not just about funding; it's about building trust, stability, and the capacity to grow without compromise.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
To ensure long-term financial sustainability through strategic fundraising, diversified institutional support, and transparent management.	Develop a **comprehensive fundraising strategy** focused on international grants, EU funding, and governmental support. Secure **multi-year project partnerships** with international organizations. Increase annual income by **at least 20% by 2029**. Conduct **annual external financial audits**. Maintain full compliance with financial reporting standards for donors.	Reliable and diversified funding streams. - Enhanced credibility with funders and partners. - Organizational resilience during periods of political or economic uncertainty. Transparent, professional financial management aligned with EU and international standards.

Priority 3 - Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning

To become more strategic, impactful, and accountable, FECH must continuously learn from its work. During the previous cycle, MEL was largely informal, with lessons learned passed along organically between the team. While this enabled flexibility, it also limited organizational learning, consistency, and donor reporting capacity. As FECH matures, it will institutionalize a **robust Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning system** that not only assesses the effectiveness of programs but also fuels strategic decision-making.

By the end of 2026, FECH will implement a structured MEL framework, including impact indicators, internal assessment tools, and regular reflection sessions. This will include an internal **"Black Box" mechanism**, where the organization documents outcomes, mistakes, and takeaways immediately after major campaigns or events. Evaluation will not be an administrative burden – it will foster a culture of reflection, growth, and transparency that enables FECH to adapt in real-time and demonstrate its value to both communities and funders.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
To institutionalize a culture of reflection and accountability through a practical and adaptive MEL system.	Develop and implement an **MEL framework** with measurable indicators. Introduce post-project evaluations and a **"Black Box" internal reflection tool**. Train staff and volunteers on data collection, reporting, and adaptive learning. Integrate MEL insights into future planning and donor reporting.	Stronger evidence-based advocacy and learning culture. Improved project design and implementation through real-time feedback. Enhanced transparency and accountability in external reporting.

Priority 4 - Communication Strategy & Visual Identity

In an increasingly crowded civic space, visibility is not a luxury; it's a necessity. Despite its growing portfolio and successful campaigns, **FECH has yet to establish a consistent and recognizable public image**. Over the next cycle, FECH will invest in building a strong communications strategy and **distinct visual identity** to become a recognized and trusted brand among its key constituencies – students, institutions, donors, and the wider public.

This will include a full brand refresh, the development of a **unified communications guide**, and the appointment of a small communications working group. Social media will be used not just for visibility, but as a **tool for mobilization**, storytelling, and advocacy. The goal is for FECH to become a **well-known name in higher education and youth spaces**, recognized not only for its messages but for its voice, tone, and values.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
To establish FECH as a trusted, visible, and values-based brand among students and civic actors in North Macedonia.	Develop a full **communications strategy** and content calendar. Create and maintain a **consistent visual identity** across platforms. - Establish a **communications working group** with editorial and design roles. Use storytelling and digital tools to amplify Erasmus+, YAC, and other initiatives.	Increased visibility and recognition of FECH among youth and institutions. Greater engagement across social media and traditional media outlets. Brand coherence that reflects FECH's mission and credibility.

3. Strategic priorities

The new strategic priorities outline the objectives within FECH's work areas for the four years from 2026 to 2030. Five specific objectives have been identified based on the cross-policy clusters and focus groups with students of public universities. This document outlines the long-term goals of how FECH, as an organization, will work and develop in different fields. **The Development Strategy 2026-2030** has been developed by the Membership, Executive Board, and Advisory Board of FECH, with a clear vision and mission outlined in the organization's statutes. The Development Strategy - **#DEVSTRA2030** is meant to be a steering tool of the organization and is adapted to the changes in the organization and the climate in which it works. The five strategic external priorities, on which FECH will focus its work and project application for the next four years, are:

1. ***Transparency and Public Responsibility in Higher Education - Higher education as a public responsibility***
2. ***Digitalization of higher education***
3. ***Academic integrity & combating plagiarism***
4. ***Active Citizenship - Empowering young people and students***

Strategic Priority 1: Transparency and Public Responsibility of Public Universities

Public universities are not private enterprises – they are publicly funded institutions entrusted with shaping future generations and advancing the public good. In North Macedonia, however, they often operate with **opaque procedures**, weak oversight, and patterns of **nepotism, cronyism, and financial irregularities**. This undermines both their academic mission and public trust. FECH's long-standing watchdog role has exposed such practices, making it clear that **transparency must become the foundation of institutional credibility**.

But the push for transparency and public responsibility is not merely a moral or ethical imperative – it is also an **economic and intellectual necessity**. A university system that tolerates nepotism, disregards merit, and operates in secrecy cannot innovate or compete

effectively. It becomes stagnant, inward-looking, and disconnected from global academic standards. As observed by many stakeholders, outdated teaching methods and institutional inertia are not coincidental; they are **products of opaque systems that reward loyalty over competence**. Transparency, on the other hand, is the first step toward building a higher education system that is dynamic, inclusive, and fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Over the next five years, FECH will intensify efforts to promote **higher education as a public responsibility**. This includes advancing bold reforms such as a **Vetting Process in Higher Education**, advocating for the **mandatory live-streaming of Senate meetings**, and launching a **Transparency Index** for public universities. Through research, pressure, and public engagement, we aim to restore public trust and drive systemic change.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
Watchdog role on the public responsibility and transparency of public universities. **Advocacy-oriented** to provide practical solutions that will increase transparency in HEIs. To institutionalize transparency mechanisms in public universities and promote accountability as a core principle of higher education governance.	Develop and implement an annual **Transparency Index** for public universities. Launch student-led monitoring groups to observe and report on university budgeting and decision-making. Advocate for the **mandatory** live-streaming of Senate and Rectorate meetings to enhance public oversight. Campaign for the introduction of a **Vetting Process in Higher Education**, ensuring ethical review of key academic personnel	Increased visibility and accountability in university operations. Regular public reporting on transparency levels. Greater public pressure for ethical governance.
To eliminate favoritism, political interference, and bias in student welfare services.	Automate the selection process for student dormitory accommodation using algorithm-based systems. Advocate for algorithmic transparency and oversight in student services.	Fairer and more merit-based access to student dormitories. Reduced opportunities for manipulation, clientelism, or

political influence in student services.

Strategic Priority 2: Digitalization of Higher Education

Digital transformation is one of the most urgent structural needs in North Macedonia's public universities. Despite being in the digital age, many institutions still operate with outdated, paper-based systems that rely heavily on in-person administrative procedures. Students are frequently required to wait in long queues to obtain documents, enroll in courses, or finalize academic requirements – routine tasks that in most education systems are resolved with a few clicks. These bureaucratic hurdles not only waste time and create frustration but also signal a broader lack of institutional modernization.

Through this strategic priority, FECH will position digitalization not merely as a technical reform but as a mechanism to enhance transparency, accountability, and student dignity. Our key vehicle in this mission is the #DigiU platform – a coalition-based, solution-oriented initiative that unites NGOs, experts, students, and institutions in a shared advocacy effort. Rather than simply criticizing the lack of progress, the platform proposes concrete tools, digital workflows, and models from best practices abroad. Over the next five years, FECH will expand this platform and further advocate for the ethical integration of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, while ensuring students are at the center of this transformation, not buried beneath its bureaucracy.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes

To advocate for and support public universities through the #DigiU platform in their transition toward fully paperless, student-centered digital systems by 2030.	Expand the implementation of the #DigiU platform as a unified advocacy space and solution hub. Develop and implement the biannual Index of the Digitalization of Public Universities. Advocate for the integration of portals for enrollment, grading, document access, and service requests.	Streamlined administrative services with reduced in-person requirements. Increased responsiveness and satisfaction among students. Universities begin transitioning to paperless administration.
To ensure that digital reforms uphold ethics, integrity, and institutional trust.	Develop and promote the **#SmartAcademia** tool for transparent academic governance. This will automate the process of academic advancements in the HEI, thus minimizing the possibility of illicit academic advancements Research and translate international best practices on the ethical use of AI in education. Facilitate expert forums and propose a national Code of Ethical AI Use in Higher Education.	Responsible and transparent adoption of AI in public education. Ethical safeguards are institutionalized alongside digital tools. - Increased legitimacy of the reform process in the eyes of students and the public.

Strategic Priority 3 - Academic Integrity & Combating Plagiarism

Academic integrity is a cornerstone of quality education, institutional credibility, and public trust. Unfortunately, in North Macedonia, breaches of academic ethics—particularly plagiarism, nepotism, and unmerited academic advancement – are widespread and rarely sanctioned. These practices not only damage the reputation of universities but also devalue the efforts of honest students and academics, weakening the overall legitimacy of higher education in the eyes of society.

FECH is committed to pushing for systemic change by addressing academic misconduct through **evidence, exposure, and advocacy**. Our goal is to create a climate of zero tolerance for plagiarism and academic fraud. We will initiate student-led reporting mechanisms, launch public accountability tools, and advocate for stronger enforcement of university integrity policies. A key initiative will be the development of a **website** - a public database documenting confirmed cases of plagiarism involving academic staff, supported by verifiable evidence. Through this strategic priority, FECH will challenge the culture of impunity and promote a higher education system where merit and ethics matter.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
To push for the establishment of mechanisms that expose academic misconduct and advocate for the adoption of strict and enforceable anti-plagiarism policies in all public universities by 2030.	Launch a website documenting proven cases of academic plagiarism. Conduct monitoring of university ethics commissions and their enforcement of academic misconduct procedures. Advocate for the revision and standardization of university anti-plagiarism regulations. Develop student-led watchdog groups to monitor academic ethics. Something along the lines of RMP (https://www.reddit.com/r/studyAbroad/comments/ds6ko2/is_there_an_equivalent_to_rate_my_professor_in/)	Public awareness and pressure on universities to address plagiarism. Greater enforcement of academic integrity policies. Institutional recognition of academic honesty as a core value. A culture shift toward ethical research and academic integrity.

Strategic Priority 4 - Active Citizenship

FECH firmly believes that students and young people must not only participate in democratic life, they must lead it. In a context where youth voices are often sidelined and

civic apathy is growing, there is an urgent need to cultivate a culture of **active citizenship** that begins in the university halls and expands into society at large. Students should not be passive recipients of policy, but active co-creators of the systems and decisions that affect their lives. Active citizenship is more than participation—it is about transformation. It requires young people not only to engage in civic life but to do so with **consciousness, courage, and critical awareness**. At FECH, we understand active citizenship as a combination of **critical thinking**, **civic engagement**, and **advocacy** – each essential in challenging structural injustices and fostering democratic accountability in higher education and beyond.

Drawing on the ideas of **Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy**, FECH promotes what we call ***critical citizenship***: an approach that equips young people to understand the power dynamics that limit their participation and empowers them to take conscious action (praxis) to challenge the status quo. In a context where students often feel disillusioned by unresponsive systems, this approach helps transform frustration into engagement and dialogue into action. Whether through student assemblies, community organizing, or national advocacy efforts, we believe that youth-led initiatives are essential for achieving social justice and building a resilient democratic culture. Over the past years, FECH has invested in the creation and empowerment of student structures such as the **National Student Body** and has supported student assemblies across the country through training, strategic development, and advocacy. The **Youth Activism Center (YAC)** in Tetovo has become a space where civic engagement thrives, having hosted over 180 activities with more than 550 young people involved since 2022. In this new strategy cycle, FECH will strengthen this ecosystem by continuing to train student leaders, expanding youth spaces, supporting Erasmus+ participation, and reinforcing youth advocacy networks in and around universities. Active citizenship will be at the heart of everything we do — as a principle, a practice, and a power. FECH in the upcoming years will introduce the concept of modern collegiality. The basic tenet of this model is the development of the old idea of collegiality to suit the needs of the 21st-century HEIs. Academic collegiality in the 21st century involves recognising that the students and academic staff are united in a common purpose and should partake equally in the management of higher education institutions.

Objective	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes
To strengthen student representation and build a culture of critical, active citizenship within universities.	Support the structuring and formal recognition of the **National Student Body**. Provide training on policy-making, advocacy, and student rights. Continue implementing the **Stronger Student Union** advanced training program.	A more organized, independent, and impactful student movement. Students become active contributors to institutional governance.
To grow local youth spaces that foster activism, dialogue, and civic engagement.	Expand and diversify programming at the **Youth Activism Center (YAC)** in Tetovo, including advocacy labs, policy workshops, and public debates. Position YAC as a regional hub for civic engagement across the Polog region.	Sustained participation by young people in civic life. YAC is recognized as a model space for youth-led initiatives and community transformation.
To increase access to international civic education and mobility opportunities.	Facilitate the participation of over **100 young people** in Erasmus+ programs by 2030. Gather and promote testimonials and impact stories from participants. Involve Erasmus+ alumni in peer mentorship and public events.	Stronger international exposure and skill-building among young leaders. Greater visibility and credibility of FECH as a civic mobilizer.
To mainstream activism as a form of civic learning within universities.	Organize events with universities to highlight success stories in student-led activism.	Civic engagement gains legitimacy within academic structures.

Advocate for recognition of civic engagement in academic and institutional life.	More students identify activism as a tool for systemic change.

4. CONCLUSION

The **Development Strategy 2026–2030 (#DEVSTRA2030)** reflects the collective vision, experience, and ambition of the Forum for Educational Change (FECH) as it enters a new phase of institutional maturity. It is more than a strategic plan — it is a commitment to youth, to education, and to reshaping public institutions through evidence-based advocacy, civic courage, and grassroots organizing.

This document serves as a guiding framework, not a straitjacket. It is designed to **offer direction without rigidity**, allowing the organization to remain adaptive and responsive to emerging challenges, shifting political landscapes, and new opportunities. As such, it is a **living document**, subject to review and refinement based on internal reflection, partner input, and the socio-political context in which we operate.

While the strategic priorities outlined here are intended to drive our development over the next four years, FECH envisions that the plan may be extended through **2032** if its goals are not at least **80% realized** by the end of the current cycle. This flexibility ensures continuity in purpose while maintaining pressure for measurable impact.

Ultimately, #DEVSTRA2030 is about **clarity of purpose**. It distills our focus around a single overarching goal: to enhance the quality and integrity of higher education in North Macedonia by empowering students, exposing institutional malpractice, and championing public responsibility. By aligning internal capacity with bold external action, FECH stands ready to shape not only policies but paradigms.