

The First Conference of the joint EU – CoE Project
„Strategic Development of Higher Education and Qualification Standards“
Sarajevo, 12th June 2013

Conclusions from the Forum 2 – Key issues for employability of BiH graduates

Moderators: Stephen Adam and Boris Curkovic

Background

Forum was attended by 24 participants, representatives of BiH academic community and stakeholders, such ministries, state agencies, trade union, employment bureau, civil servant agency, other educational projects and so on. Expectations from the forum's discussion were presented at the end of the first plenary session, so this report will present key conclusions using expectations as guidelines.

Summary of discussion

It is clear that a lot of external factors, like economic, social or politic situation in BiH, have big impact on employability of BiH graduates. However, the focus of the Project is what is possible that academic community together with higher education stakeholders do to improve employability of graduates. So, the main conclusion, as well as almost the whole context of discussion, was about the **relevance of BiH qualifications** at the labor market. Knowledge, skills and competences obtained during the higher education should be relevant for employers. Links between universities and business sector should be established and strengthened.

Discussion at the Forum showed that establishment of sustainable links between academic and a business sector was very challenging issue for both, academic community and employers. For the beginning of the process the most challenging matter is **how to motivate business sector** to be involved in academic processes at the universities (later, demanding task for universities will be to accept and implement recommendations given by business sector). A lot of good examples were presented at the Forum, such students' internships, personal contacts, and alumni surveys. Those examples could be disseminated and introduced at other study programs and higher education institutions. However, necessity of **systematic approach in establishment of links between higher education and business sector** was particularly pointed out.

Conclusions

1. Good practice examples in BiH

Links between universities and business sector have been established at some study programs at public universities. Following examples should be supported by institutions and disseminated:

- **Students' internships** – students work some time (one or more months, usually during the summer break) in companies related to branch of study. Their work could be paid, depending on agreement between university and company, or interns and employers. The purpose of internship is to provide students with practical experience, to improve their skills, to learn about working conditions and working atmosphere. Internships have impact to employability

of students upon graduation – could be employed in the same company, but if not, internships undoubtedly strengthen practical skills, competences and knowledge of students. **Internships should be incorporated as mandatory part of curricula at study programs, where applicable.**

- **Personal contacts of professors and representatives of business sectors** – That is good channel for professors to hear what is actually at the labor market, about new practices and new trends. Such information could be transferred to the students or incorporated in regular curricula. Representatives of business sector could be invited as special lecturer occasionally. However, this very useful tool depends on pro-active approach of each professor.
- **Alumni** associations could be very useful source of information about relevance of study programs at the labor market. Particularly recent graduates could estimate their knowledge, skills and competences on the best way. Alumni should be consulted whenever the study program is revised.

2. Obstacles? Pitfalls? Shortcomings?

Complex political situation, economic crisis, and underfunded higher education have significant influence to the employability of graduates. There is very big unemployment rate in the country (there are 23,024 higher educated unemployed persons out of 432,853 unemployed in total – 5.98% in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). An UNDP research conducted last year showed that average period between graduation and employment of young people lasted 18 months.

Inadequate regulation also has influence on employability of graduates. It has been the case especially regarding new bachelors employability. **Rulebook on Academic Titles should be governmental priority.**

3. How can QF-HE implementation help?

QF-HE will have two main impacts: on relevance of qualifications (involvement of labor market and other social stakeholders) and on alignment of qualifications in complex structured country. It was discussed about differences between benchmark statements and occupational standards.

4. Which subject fields for benchmark statements and occupational standards?

It was discussed about the issue and agreed following subjects:

- i. Economics
- ii. Mechanical engineering
- iii. English language and teacher education
- iv. Agriculture and food technology
- v. ICT

5. Interlinkages with other projects

University of Tuzla and University of Banja Luka participate in the Tempus IV Project CONGRAD – Conducting graduate surveys and improving alumni services for enhanced strategic management and quality improvement (<http://www.congrad.org/tempus>). The project will provide results on alumni

surveys by July 2013. Survey report could be good resource of information regarding employability and relevance of qualifications.

6. Which stakeholders to involve?

During the Forum it was discussed about involvements of representatives of business sector (each branch of study should identify related business sector representatives). At the Forum session different stakeholders representatives were present, so it is quite obvious that responsible ministries, state agencies (including civil-servant agency), employment bureaus, trade unions, employer associations could contribute to the Project.

7. How to ensure sustainable results?

Since the focus of discussion at the Forum was on involvement of representatives of business sector, logical conclusion related to the sustainability is to create **structured relations between higher education institutions and business sector representatives**. Examples of good practice presented at the Forum are very good and should be continued and disseminated. However, they are not structured and they were run by personal initiatives of professors.

Structured links between universities and business sector could be established by **inviting business sector representatives in the universities' steering boards** (or similar bodies – advisory board or to create board or council for curricula development where business representatives can properly participate).

The other structured way is **internal quality assurance**. Universities should develop procedures on creation links with labor market. Those links should be “fitness for purpose”. Business sector should always be asked about learning outcomes, new curricula, new study programs, etc. Feedback and recommendations given by business sector should be seriously taken into consideration at higher education institutions. They will probably propose something different than existing practice and some resistance to new practice will be made for sure. Alumni associations should also be established on structured way, per each study program. Alumni should be regularly consulted and their opinions should be treated seriously. Criteria for accreditation of higher education institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires from universities both, links with business sector when discuss about curricula, and proper alumni associations. Accreditation procedures, as external quality assurance activity, will check, advice and push higher education institutions to create sustainable links with business sector. Accreditation of study programs will check relevance of qualifications.