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**Joint EU/CoE Project**  
**'Strategic Development of Higher Education and Qualification Standards' in BiH**  
**(SD-HEQS), 2013-2015**

**Launching Conference**

**12 June 2013, Holiday Inn Hotel, Sarajevo**

**Report**

**The conference purpose**

The Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Council of Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina held a conference to mark the launch of a new joint project to support Higher Education Reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The conference was designed to provide a consultation platform for a wide range of actors and stakeholders. It was attended by 84 participants, representatives of policy makers, the academic community, locally based international organisations and NGOs, as well as other stakeholders, such as the employment bureaus, statistics agencies, international organisations, chambers of commerce and unions.

10 years after Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the Bologna Process the conference took stock of problems, priorities and progress made with higher education reform in BiH to date and helped identify key issues to be addressed in the new project. It resulted in concrete proposals for the project's focus and implementation and its interaction with authorities, academic community and other partner and initiatives in the country.

**The joint EU/CoE project**

The project "Strategic Development of Higher Education and Qualification Standards" (SD-HEQS) was launched upon the request of the BiH authorities and will last for two years. It is co-financed by the EU from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA 2011) and the Council of Europe, with a total budget of €1.115.000.

It should assist Bosnia and Herzegovina to achieve one of its declared goals in its strategic development plan for education 2008-2015: the full accession to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Project is implemented by the Council of Europe.

The project's core areas of action concern:

- The elaboration of priorities for strategic development of higher education in Bosnia Herzegovina beyond 2015, based on a sector-wide analysis conducted within the project.
- The development of subject benchmark statements and occupational standards in five different subject fields and for a variety of professions. By doing so, the project will interlink higher education qualifications with occupations. It will provide good practice for strengthening the employability of graduates in BiH and contribute to the implementation of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in BiH.

### **Conference Opening and Key Notes**

The conference was opened by Ms Daria Duilović from the Ministry of Civil Affairs who emphasised the importance of the new project for the development and implementation of the Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning in BiH. Ms Natialia Dianiskova from the European Union Delegation to BiH put the new joint EU/CoE project in perspective with the Europe 2020 Strategy for the advancement of the economy of the European Union and the strategy's flagship initiatives, in particular "Youth on the move". Ms Mary Ann Henessey, Head of the Council of Europe Office in BiH, referred to education reform in BiH as a hallmark for the further development of the country and its citizens as well as for European Integration.

Mr Sjur Bergan, Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe, and Mr Stephen Adam, CoE expert, introduced the core topics of the project, with key notes on the European and the BiH reform agenda, and the interaction and interdependence of academic qualifications and the world of work. Ms Karen Roberts, CoE programme advisor, introduced the new joint EU/CoE project and the work in Forum 1 and Forum 2.

### **Stakeholder Consultations and Conclusions**

An important part of the conference were group discussions on the core topics of the new joint EU/CoE project. Each group drew conclusions and made recommendations on issues that should be followed up by the new joint EU/CoE project.

**Forum 1:** "Key issues for a meaningful analysis of the HE sector in BiH" was a group discussion on issues related to strategic development at sector level. It was moderated by Mr Sjur Bergan and Mr Dejan Bokonjić in his capacity as CoE expert.

The participants

- Share a coherent view of the main weaknesses of the BiH higher education system / sector.
- Recommend a joint approach for the harmonisation of laws relevant to higher education.

- Promote EU and CoE support for an increased university autonomy
- Put forward quality assurance a good practice example for the academic community's capacity to implement systemic reforms in a joint effort and bottom up approach.
- Consider obstacles for an operational external quality assurance system to be mainly of political nature.
- Recommend to enhance the role of the agencies and universities in the accreditation process, thus providing the required accountability to the public authorities.
- Point to corruption in higher education as an important challenge, the occurrence of corruption as a criminal offence as well as system inbuilt corruption. Recommend to address this also with international support. Among others an initiative supported by Transparency International was mentioned.
- Emphasise the need to enhance internationalisation of higher education in BiH, among others to increase international mobility (outgoing and incoming) and exchange.
- Recommend to analyse the extent of internationalisation and reasons for insufficiencies (language proficiency, recognition, awareness, brain drain, quality etc.).
- Recommend measures to increase the focus in competences and skills. This would encompass a reduction of 1<sup>st</sup> cycle degrees; an increase of 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle degrees; a careful assessment of the real need for 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle degrees, considering joint programmes by several HEIs, and ensuring international perspective.
- Recommend the systematic strengthening of (and prioritising for) academic research.
- Suggest interlinkage and intercoaching of projects and initiatives in the sector for stronger coherence (for example a joint round table by the joint EU/CoE and the Higher Education Financing projects)
- Revisit and build on results from previous initiatives (in the joint EU/CoE project and others) and seek to increase sustainability of project results.

**Forum 2:** "Key issues for employability of BiH graduates" was moderated by Mr Stephen Adam and Mr Boris Čurković, in their capacity of CoE experts. The group discussed the development of subject benchmark statements and occupational standards for the further implementation of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in BiH and increased employability of graduates. The majority of social partners attending the conference participated in this forum.

The participants

- were introduced to the concept of subject benchmark statements.
- Consider the relevance of BiH qualifications for the economy should be a focal point for their further development.

- discussed approaches how to motivate the labour market to participate in the design of qualifications and curricula.
- Put forward good practice at three BiH universities (Mostar, Tuzla and Zenica) through a recently launched survey among alumni regarding their experience on the labour market upon graduation, in the frame of the Tempus IV CONGRAD project. The results of this survey are expected to be available by the end of June.
- Emphasise the need to structure/systemise cooperation of universities and economy. So far a proactive approach and personal contacts of university teachers are most conducive to reach this goal but the group considers this is by far not sufficient.
- Recommend internships to become integral parts of study programmes.
- Remind that the most important employer in BiH is still the public sector and therefore emphasise the need for a rulebook on academic titles and degrees.
- Consider the weak economy and politics to be the main obstacles to a strategic policy for increasing employability.
- Emphasise the need for an increasing balance between public and private sector employment.
- For the development of subject benchmark statements and occupational standards the group recommended the following subject fields: English language and teacher education, engineering, and Economics, agriculture/food processing and ICT. The choice was based on a) the subjects which were piloted for curricular development in line with the framework for higher education qualification in BiH in a previous joint EU/CoE project; and b) to build on occupational standards that have been developed in an EU funded VET project, for qualifications obtained in secondary and post secondary education.

### **Concluding remarks**

At the closing session, representatives of the EU Delegation and the Council of Europe acknowledged the intensity and high level of discussion throughout the event and were impressed by the strong commitment of the participating stakeholders. Overarching conclusions from both fora were

- There is a general coherence of views among the participants on the main weaknesses of the higher education system in BiH, on priorities and recommendations for the project.
- There is a need for a development strategy defining clear tasks, responsibilities and timelines.
- There is a need to (re-)orient qualifications in BiH with a view to employability, but also with a view to the development of the economy, of new jobs and of a democratic society.
- There is a need for interaction between civil society and public authorities to make essentially necessary progress.

- There is a need to make links between existing educational projects and to ensure all appropriate BiH institutions and organisations are consulted, e.g. the BiH Rectors' Conference.

Finally, it was also recognised that the responsibility for higher education reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina lies with the BiH public authorities and higher education community. Acknowledging its limitations, this new project will help develop good practice and issue expertise and evidence-based recommendations, and seek to involve decision makers to an extent that ensures sustainable project results. Rector's Conference was invited to be partner to CoE and EU in implementation of the project.

Sarajevo, 17 June 2013