

Mary Ann Hennessey, Head of CoE Office in BiH, Opening remarks, "Strategic Development of Higher Education and Qualification Standards", Sarajevo 12 June 2013

Co-operation in the field of higher education, and between higher education institutions is one of the hallmarks of European Integration – both within the European Union and the Council of Europe – as evidenced not least by the Bologna Process for a European Higher Education Area, the CoE/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention and by the EU's Erasmus programmes. Additionally, for very many years, the European Union and the Council of Europe have worked closely together to advance a European framework for education/higher education co-operation and continuous improvement, which will be put to the benefit of BiH in this joint project.

The joint goal of CoE and of EU is to enable BiH higher education, its institutions, graduates, academics and students to benefit fully from European opportunities and to play its full role for development in BiH. Today, I can say that we are glad to "be back", after a two year break, with a new joint project building on the results of the three previous joint EU/CoE projects we implemented since 2003 – when BiH joined the Bologna Process.

We appreciate the progress that BiH made in HE reforms over these last 10 years. But we are also aware there are huge challenges to overcome, if higher education in BiH is to truly advance the country's development. The sector is under-resourced and highly fragmented – contributing to a lack of quality assurance, difficulties with national and international recognition of diplomas and study periods, lack of effective measures against corruption, high drop out rates, youth unemployment, brain drain – none of which are helpful for BiH, in the present and certainly not in the future. The project aims at developing at least two important functions of higher education; to prepare for employment and to prepare for democratic citizenship – and, I would hope, also to further the personal development of students.

Higher Education in BiH is expected to generate well-qualified and competent graduates and democratic citizens. It is expected to carry out meaningful research and maintain and develop a broad and advanced knowledge base. The European Higher Education Area provides a wide range of very useful tools, practice and expertise to address some of the challenges BiH is facing. European experience has also shown that hurried, compulsory top-down reform bears risks. But neither is there any time to loose. Young citizens have the right to academic qualifications made in BiH that are recognised as a trademark in the country and in the world.

This joint project of the European Union and the Council of Europe is an opportunity. With genuine commitment by all stakeholders, it will provide evidence and good practice for sustainable

development and reform at the level of institutions, and the sector. The results will not come as a surprise, because they will be developed by and with you, as higher education professionals and policy-makers, and will be applicable and implementable right away.

I warmly welcome you to this conference, and I invite and encourage you to help us put this project on the right track from the very start. I would like to thank the EU Delegation in BiH for its participation today and the professional and collegial support to the project management team in the CoE office. By the end of today's conference, I hope that the knowledge, experience and participation of all of you here will bring tangible conclusions on how to determine priorities for the strategic development of HE as well as the qualifications it offers. Based on these conclusions our joint project will launch its work.

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