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**Ministry of Education
and Science**

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Western Balkans Policy Recommendations for Quality in Higher Education

on the occasion of the
Western Balkans Ministerial Conference:

Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

–
Trends and Developments in the EU and Western Balkans

26 and 27 September 2023
Skopje, the Republic of North Macedonia



Western Balkans Ministerial Conference: Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education – Trends and Developments
in the EU and Western Balkans,

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Executive Summary

These Policy Recommendations aim to address the challenges and provide recommendations for enhancing the quality of higher education in the Western Balkans. They are the result of the information, discussions and conclusions shared during the Western Balkans Ministerial Conference: *Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education – Trends and Developments in the EU and Western Balkans*, held on 26th – 27th September 2023 in Skopje, the Republic of North Macedonia. The conference has concluded that the Western Balkans region has made significant progress in recent years regarding quality and quality assurance mechanisms; however, considering the ongoing challenges at global and regional level, the path to enhancements is never, nor should it be, finalized.

This document provides key policy recommendations that can be taken into account when planning future actions in higher education systems. They should facilitate creating conditions for providing high-quality, internationally competitive higher education, and for meeting the demands of global and regional economies and societies.

It is important to emphasize that this document is not all-inclusive as it doesn't include the inputs from all of the Western Balkans economies; nor does it cover all of the challenges and recommendations identified during the discussions. The focus of this document is kept on the issues that were in the focus of the Conference: global developments, quality culture, quality assurance, access and inclusivity, and internationalization.



Introduction

The Western Balkans region has made commendable strides in economic and social development. However, this growth and further integration into the global economy, has to be supported by continuous advancements in the quality of higher education. High-quality education is not only a fundamental right but also a catalyst for innovation, economic growth, and social progress, that can offer stability and security for the Western Balkans citizens.

The following challenges have been identified in the course of the presentations, discussions and conclusions:

1. Keeping up with the global developments and instabilities

Global developments and instabilities include phenomena such as globalisation, ageing population, technological and digital revolution, increased use of automatization and artificial intelligence, climate change, global health threats, geopolitical crisis, just to name a few.

2. Building Quality Culture

Quality culture is a complex concept still lacking a generally accepted approach, with various perspectives, approaches and methodologies. This results in a variable relation to quality.

3. Quality Assurance

The standards agreed at the European level, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Standards and Guidelines - ESG)¹ are partially being implemented in the Western Balkans. This leads to more difficult recognition of qualifications and lack of trust, with potential harmful effect on the reputation of institutions and their graduates.

4. Access and Inclusivity

Higher education in the Western Balkans has yet to fully reach its potential in *“fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society”* (London Communiqué, 2007)², meaning that there are still obstacles in funding and implementing measures that hinder the principles of *accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion into all laws, policies and practices* (Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex II 2020)³.

¹<https://www.ehea.info/page-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance>

²https://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf

³https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf



5. Internationalization

Internationalization of the higher education systems in the Western Balkans still faces many challenges, such as cultural and language barriers, quality assurance of joint programmes and recognition of their qualifications, inequalities in participation in international experiences, financial challenges for both students as well as for higher education institutions, and sustainability of international programmes.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Responsiveness to global developments and instabilities

Responsiveness requires collaboration between governments and government agencies, accreditation bodies, universities, business community, research community, student population and other stakeholders. A systemic approach is essential to ensure that higher education remains relevant and contributes effectively to addressing global challenges.

The collaboration and communication between all the interested parties should result in the policies aligned with the societal and global challenges; in flexible curricula that prepares graduates for the future; and in the use of innovative pedagogies, with emphasis on multi-disciplinarity and practical learning. Higher education should provide for the needs of diverse learners and should support wider access.

2. Building Quality Culture

Quality culture should be supported by management vision and actions, with quality standards integrated into the overall functioning of a relevant institution.

Internal Quality mechanisms at policy levels, levels of Quality Assurance agencies and of higher education institutions can make the basis for establishing the quality culture when there is an agreed set of values, beliefs, expectations and commitment to quality, as well as professional and ethical standards.

To support quality culture, dialogue and mutual trust between all stakeholders should be built, with shared improvement efforts.

3. Strengthening Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Efforts, resources and expertise for strengthening Quality Assurance Mechanisms in the Western Balkans and their alignment with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Standards and Guidelines - ESG) should be increased, together with the commitment at the policy level and legislative adaptations. Independence of national quality assurance bodies must be guaranteed, as well as the independence of the quality



assurance procedures outcomes. Greater cooperation between the European and Western Balkans Quality Assurance bodies, as well as among the Western Balkans Quality Assurance bodies themselves, should be encouraged, with regular exchange of expertise, relevant data and practices. At the same time, greater communication mechanisms should be established between the Quality Assurance agencies and Higher Education Institutions for the purpose of integration of quality assurance standards into day-to-day operations.

4. Enhance Access and Inclusivity

At the level of decision making, higher education policy should ensure legislative and financial support for measures that aim at promoting equity, diversity and inclusion. The body of knowledge based on reliable data on student population should be developed. It should serve as a basis for system and institutional level policies towards widening participation through supporting equitable access to and completion of higher education. The understanding of the term „vulnerable groups“ should be widened to include all those who, for various reasons, do not have full access to all the resources. More focus should be placed on ensuring that learners acquire knowledge that is responsive to societal needs including but not limited to labour market, environmental and communal needs.

5. Provide conditions for internationalization

Considering the similarities within the Western Balkans region, it should be considered how the internationalization can be strengthened within the region, through cooperation and pooling of common resources together. Quality assurance bodies should pursue a more active involvement and participation in international networks and peer support activities, through their own or project resources. A national level coordination and mapping of existing internationalization strategies at institutional level could be further pursued to harness and effectively implement best practices. National strategies for internationalization of higher education should be further developed in line with the EHEA commitments that would support the mobility of students and staff, the development of joint program procedures, the implementation of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes and other joint initiatives in the region. Directed funding options and recognition policies, following an equitable approach, should support such initiatives taking into account the specificities of each economy.



Conclusion

Improving the quality of higher education in the Western Balkans is a crucial step towards enhancing the region's competitiveness, economic development, and social progress. These policy recommendations are the result of information exchange and discussions among the participants of *Western Balkans Ministerial Conference: Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education – Trends and Development in the EU and Western Balkans*, held on 26th – 27th September 2023 in Skopje, the Republic of North Macedonia, which included the participants from the policy level, implementation level and level of practitioners from the Western Balkans. These policy recommendations can provide a roadmap for policy makers, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, and stakeholders to work collaboratively and to bring about positive change in the higher education landscape of the Western Balkans.