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Paper proposal form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Proposal

Title: An empirical study to strengthen the Quality Assurance System within Western Balkans' HEIs and Quality Assurance Agencies.

Abstract (150 words max):

The main aim of this paper is to bring together the conclusions drawn from an empirical study carried out with a selection of Universities and Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Macedonia and Serbia (South-East Europe=SEE). This novel pilot process of self-evaluation of study programmes on the one hand and on the other the external evaluation of QAAs gave us a unique opportunity to have an in-depth insight of three different contexts of the same region that share some common elements but also differ consistently. This was also a unique opportunity to foster networking and cooperation among the countries involved and sharing good practices with European specialists. We present our main conclusions on strengths and areas for improvement of the quality assurance systems analysed and present recommendations for the three



countries. The activities have been developed under the CUBRIK Tempus Project (funded by the European Commission).

Text of paper (3000 words max):

1. THE CUBRIK PROJECT

The CUBRIK project¹ (2010-2013) is focused on Strengthening Quality Assurance (QA) System within South-East Europe (SEE) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in support of National and Regional Planning.

Its main outcomes are:

- Creating a **functional framework for the QA implementation** by increasing inter-institutional liaison, networking and sharing of best practices. This includes a network of experts and the preparation of study trend analysis on QA in the Countries involved
- Setting up a **Western Balkans Quality Assurance Observatory** to agree on common practices, track the last developments and foster benchmarking initiatives on QA for HE
- Defining **common guidelines and methodologies for QA at National and Regional level** that foster the creation of integral strategies supported by data evidence and based on the constitution of common values
- **Strengthening capacity building** through a targeted training programme
- **Improving technical capacity** by conducting External Institutional Assessment of HEIs and QA Agencies
- **Disseminating the project results** at different levels within Western Balkans institutions for the maximum project sustainability

The consortium is composed by the main actors involved in the QA procedures at the SEE countries plus European experts:

- *Spain*: University of Alicante + Spanish Ministry for Education, Culture and Sport
- *Germany*: ASIIN
- *Belgium*: Erasmushogeschool Brussel
- *Ireland*: University College Cork
- *Austria*: Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance
- *Republic of Serbia* (universities of): Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Nis + Ministry of Education + Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance
- *Bosnia and Herzegovina* (universities of): Banja Luka, Mostar, Tuzla, Zenica + Ministry of Science and Technology, Federal Ministry of Education and Science and Agency for Development of Higher Education + Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance
- *Republic of Macedonia* (universities of): St. Kliment Ohridski, Tetovo + Ministry of Education and Science + Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board of the Republic of Macedonia
- *External project expert*, György BAZSA

2. PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The reform content of the project is based at four implementation levels towards the achievement of specific objectives. At **NATIONAL** and **INSTITUTIONAL** levels the reform content gave as result the implementation of internal and external QA practices in line with the European experience of the

¹ www.cubrik.eu



EFQM Excellence Model and ESGs (for HEIs + QAAs). A common methodology for the institutional assessment has been introduced and benchmark has been made. At **REGIONAL** level the project achieved the creation of the *QA Observatory*² to foster regional initiatives as an excellent starting point for stronger regional cooperation. The experience of the *National Round Tables* organised (with the main actors involved in QA) served to create a precedent in making the national issues a regional concern.

The core project methodology consisted in building capacity through **targeted trainings** and **strengthening of physical infrastructure** followed by **practical implementation of assessment activities at HEI and QAA levels**.

Indeed the **trainings** have been designed according to the needs identified during the proposal preparation phase; they cover the full spectrum necessary for the implementation of the external QA culture within the partner Universities and QAA including the practical observation session within the European Partners institutions.

Top managers from SEE HEIs, QAA and Ministries organised **3 National Round Tables** for the adjustment and review of existing national legal frameworks. Analysis has been then made at regional level with a special emphasis on adopting regional legislation on the HEIs assessment in line with national reform priorities and on-going European developments.

After that, the **external assessment of HEIs** took place. Concerning the SEE universities, training has been first provided by EU experts on the Institutional Assessment Model and EFQM/TRIS Excellence Model. Then, self-assessment methodologies and external review with accreditation followed by the exercise of assessing the university at the institutional level have also been carried out. As the involvement of stakeholders has been identified as critical for the successful implementation of quality culture within an institution, the assessments included identification of methods and practical implementation of processes for the inclusion of different stakeholders and in particular the inclusion of students.

The final step of the CUBRIK project consisted in the training of the **external assessment of QAAs** following the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The exercise of external assessment carried out after having received the training (for Serbia it was the real process and for Bosnia and Herzegovina was a pilot process) provided a unique opportunity for capacity building through training workshop and the acquirement of practical knowledge in the external assessment of QAA. Again stakeholders have been invited to participate in the assessment activities of the Quality Assurance Agencies.

3. STATE AND TASKS OF SEE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

Thus, after having carried out these parallel pilot processes for targets for HEIs and QAAs, we analysed the national status of QA systems in the three countries and proposed the detection of relevant gaps and aspects for improvement. Based on our experience and other European ones, we formulated a set of recommendations per each country involved. In fact even if they are in the same SEE region and share some common aspects in their QA systems, they have diverse contexts. Thus, deeply understanding these differences was essential to make tailor made suggestions for their improvement or at least for raising their awareness on the importance of having an effective QA system for HE.

3.1 Serbia

The first **Round Table** was carried out at the University of Novi Sad, while CAQA was in the process of requesting the ENQA Membership. That is why the **trainings** were very useful for them, which they exploited to prepare a high quality self-evaluation report and to organise the external site visit of ENQA. From the positive results obtained (CAQA received the ENQA membership) there is a clear

² www.qa-observatory.eu



evidence that the Agency as well as the key stakeholders in the field of QA, in particular staff and students of HEIs, the QAA and the HE Ministry, in the past years have completed substantial steps in developing a QA system in line with international best practice. With the ESG, criteria for accreditation of HEIs, as well as guidelines for interpreting the criteria in place, most part of the preparatory work has been accomplished and the HEIs are now in the phase of preparing for self-evaluation. It turned out in this case, too, that ESG for QA in European Higher Education Area and the criteria for accreditation of HEIs are a good approach both to supporting quality enhancement in the HEIs and demonstrating accountability towards the public. This was recognised by all stakeholders to be of a high importance.

In order to foster a common understanding of the purpose, principles and procedures of QA, further cooperation between HEIs, the CAQA and Ministry of Education, as demonstrated successfully in the CUBRIK project is of a high relevance. The Commission strengthens the importance of the training of experts in its development strategies and activities. The appointment of experts, following and international call was recognised as very valuable and it is intended to continue to strengthen and improve the process for appointment and training. Further training of expert reviewers is necessary to ensure alignment of recommendations and outcomes of institutional reviews from all parties involved. The need for independence of the Commission was stressed and noted that this is in line with the ENQA policies.

3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The second **Round Table** was organized in Bosnia and Herzegovina where also the President of ENQA, Achim Hopbach shared his experience. The Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance (HEA) carried out the **entire external evaluation site visit pilot process** and thus they set out a committee for Self-evaluation reporting drafting and also organised the site visit of the external panel. The main outcomes of the pilot process are:

Criteria for institutional accreditation have been defined and published by HEA, but at the moment there cannot be a final assessment on how these will be implemented in real accreditation situations, as the first site visits have been carried out yet. Factual compliance of the accreditation criteria with ESG part 1 will be fully assessable only then. The criteria have been drafted in a common discussion and consultation process between HEA, HEIs and with Ministries in BiH. It is positively noted that students were always involved in these processes.

Documents on *criteria for institutional accreditation* and *norms for determining minimum standards in HE* have been developed in a common process with stakeholders (HEIs, students, education authorities) and are publicly available in the state languages and in English.

The document on determining minimum standards also includes information on the accreditation procedure, recommendations on the working method of experts as well as on possible outcomes of the procedure. It serves simultaneously as a guideline both for Higher Education Institutions and panels.

Although there is one common Framework Law on QA and HEA is set up by the Parliament as an umbrella organization, 12 different implementing laws are in force and 12 different authorities can conduct accreditation procedures and take decisions. The complex structure of external QA in BiH makes it very difficult to assess the factual independence of HEA, and implies that different procedural steps (panel selection, decision making, etc.) currently cannot be carried out in a fully independent manner. HEA is not really in a position to carry out this consistency check as the agency does not receive the SER from the HEI, does not participate in the site visits and is also not involved in the discussion on the decision.

There is a general understanding and agreement among the stakeholders involved that external assessment should have a focus on enhancement and development of the institution rather than be a control instrument. The idea of having HEIs to develop an action plan and follow-up procedure is



appreciated. It should, however, be defined who will follow up the process. HEA plans to introduce an appeal procedure and to provide the opportunity of commenting on the panel report in the form of a written statement by the HEI.

At the moment a system wide analysis cannot be carried out since no complete accreditation procedures have been implemented.

Currently, HEA seems to be well financed, equipped and staffed. Staff members are well qualified, competent and extremely motivated.

The activities of HEA are perceived in a very positive way by all stakeholders who feel actively supported in the implementation of internal QA and related external QA expectations. Nevertheless, HEA's role deserves to be further defined and clarified by the agency management because within the Governing Board there seems to be a conflicting understanding of the role of HEA and the Board itself. The mission statement could be broadened by including a visionary aspect.

3.3 Macedonia

The third **Round Table** was organized at the University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Republic of Macedonia. In this case no pilot process of external evaluation has been taken place since the Macedonian Board for Accreditation and Evaluation was not in the conditions to undertake this exercise. In fact during the project implementation, the Agency was closed and then reopened and the Board members did not express their willingness to make such exercise, but preferred to have a **joint meeting with the representative of the Higher Education Ministry**.

From both the discussion of the round table and the meetings organised, there is clear evidence that the autonomy of the Board is essential as also its separate accountability. Moreover, according to a survey carried out earlier by the World Bank, they concluded there is a growing demand for high-qualified workforce in Macedonia and this stresses the importance of having an effective Quality Assurance system implemented for HE.

The need for an independent QA Agency was also underlined by the EU partners, as crucial for implementing an effective and excellent QA system in the national HE system. Other challenges the HE system in Macedonia is facing are the lack of use of PDCA cycle, problems with the implementation of students' mobility. In addition they have problems with the QAA since it is established but the reality is that it is not functioning also because they do not have the resources necessary to evaluate the HEIs study programmes and go and visit the universities.

According to the HE Ministry, in this country they have no concrete structures in HE and thus no action plan with concrete tasks established. There is the urgent need to build up a quality culture and a serious commitment from HEIs.

To conclude the main challenging point is that the Macedonian QA Agency is not working properly. Here again there is a strong need for trained people to be involved in QA processes. Last but not least, cooperation among HEIs within the country, but also at a regional as well as international level is essential to establish a clear and effective QA system for HE.

4. ACTIVITIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Universities after having received intensive **training programme** choose their **self-assessment** method (EFQM or TRIS). Thus, the structure of the self-assessment has been based around the 9 criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model. The self-assessment lasted 2 days including the activity on identifying improvement actions and documenting an improvement plan. SEE HEIs produced a high-level **self-assessment report** against the 9 criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model. As a result, they



developed an understanding of its strengths, areas for improvement and as a consequence, produced a prioritised improvement plan.

The next step consisted in developing an **action plan** both to help monitoring the actions as well as to provide the necessary documentation for validating deployment during the **site visit**. An assessment committee was nominated to carry out the assessment process and it was composed by: 1 vice-rector for QA or similar, 2 experts from the QA Unit, 2 teachers, 2 administrative and 1 representative of the student association.

During the next stage the SEE HEIs demonstrated that **improvement actions** have been deployed. With a second round of site visits by EU experts, SEE HEIs demonstrated that they successfully deployed an improvement plan taking into account the feedback from self-assessment against the EFQM/TRIS Excellence Model provided by the EU experts.

The external assessment teams were composed by EU experts, National QAA and international expert from another project Partner Country (to foster networking among them). Thus, Each SEE HEI received 2 site visits and the external assessment performed during the site visit and by the external assessment report.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Due to space limits this section presents general recommendations given to HEIs. However, for all content you can contact the CUBRIK project coordinator.

ESG 1.1: From the CUBRIK activities carried out one important factor to underline and that should be taken into account is the **commitment of HEIs managers and QA staff** on the importance of having a robust, updated and tailor made quality assurance system. Managers' commitment is essential for mobilizing resources (staff and material ones). It should be also a *sine qua non* attitude of academic and administrative staff. All these should be an important and integrated part of the carefully prepared and widely discussed **institutional mission statement**. Increasing cooperation with other institutions by means of diverse initiatives would also be of a great help to learn from others' experiences and good practice. The co-operation of universities and agencies in the CUBRIK project serves as effective background in this respect.

The university policy in QA should be periodically revised and improved based on surveys and indicators monitoring using appropriate IT systems and tools.

Last but not least, students' involvement and stakeholders' beyond the academic community is crucial in this processes and their involvement must be fostered. Student unions could contribute to the effective student representation. A well-defined strategy for stakeholders' involvement should be defined, implemented and updated to include them in QA processes at HEIs.

ESG 1.2: Also with the help, support and regulations from the national Quality Assurance Agency, HEIs should set **study programmes** in line with **market demand**.

After the pilot process of SER of universities' study programmes, in general was clear that a better definition of **learning outcomes** is essential for a better set out of the study programme.

More strict cooperation and feedback has to be collected from labour market and other organisation relevant for such study programme. It's a good practice if institutional and agency boards have active members from the external community.

ESG 1.3: From the feedback of some study visits carried out by EU partners, there is a clear need of being clear and transparent on **students' assessment**. This will improve their motivation and performance and also attract other at HEIs. Internal regulations of students' assessment should be part of the institutional by laws after consultation with student representatives and the academic community.



ESG 1.4: Opportunities for additional **pedagogical training** for teachers should be given by the HEIs. Modern and adequate **infrastructure** (library, laboratory, IT etc.) are crucial conditions for research work of the teachers which must be considered as a sound basis of up to date teaching material.

ESG 1.5: the importance of having adequate **facilities** at disposal of the academic and student community was underlined. Universities in order to have high quality study programmes and to be high quality and a reference institution must ensure that they meet also with the material **resources** adequateness. Premises, internet access, laboratories, classrooms, equipment, etc. are all factors that influence the study programme implementation and further results.

ESG 1.6: There is an urgent need of having an appropriate **information system** that is able to collect all indicators, monitor them and thus provide the needed results whenever needed for the improvement of a certain aspect (study programme or service) at university level.

ESG 1.7: Transparency is crucial for the development of an institution, especially for universities that have to be chosen by students and their families. From experiences of many of the site visits performed there is a clear need of improving this aspect. This recommendation could be also extended to all QAA especially to the one of the Republic of Macedonia. Having a website with relevant information on both national language and English is crucial. The **Western Balkans Quality Assurance Observatory** will serve as a good example in this respect.

References:

The European Commission's publication "Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010 –The Impact of the Bologna Process", EACEA 2010.

Kovač, N. Humer, R., Mujkić D. And Kovačević, A. (2009). *Analysis of QA trends in Higher Education in the EU, South-East Europe and Bosnia and Herzegovina*. WUS Austria.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina:

SELF-EVALUATION REPORT of the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance (2012). HEA

Description of the National Higher Education System

Baseline of the Qualifications Framework

The Framework for HE Qualifications in Bosnia and Herzegovina

For the Republic of Serbia:

Pekic Quarrie, S., Dusika Pavlovic, D. and Spasic, S. (2012). *Self-evaluation report of The Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA)*.

Serbian Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA)–*Report of the Panel ENQA Review*, Site Visit 27–28 September 2012.

Description of the National Higher Education System

Rules and Regulations for Accreditation and Quality Assurance

Compatibility with European Standards and Guidelines

Guide for Students

Annual Report on Activities of National Quality Assurance Agencies in 2011



For the Republic of Macedonia:

Law on Higher Education

List of accredited Higher Education Institutions

Ordinance on norms and standards for establishing and performing higher education activities -
Changes and amendments

Ordinance on norms and standards for establishing and performing higher education activities

Ordinance on the national framework for higher education qualifications

Rulebook on the mandatory components of the first-, second- and third-cycle study programmes

Rulebook on the procedures and operations by the Higher Education Accreditation Board

Questions for discussion:

PLEASE CHOOSE THE ONES THAT ARE MOST INTERESTING AND BETTER SUIT FOR DISCUSSION

General questions for the entire Western Balkans region universities and agencies:

1. According to your experience, how could we **foster the commitment of the managerial staff** of HEIs and agencies so that they can understand to what extent having a robust internal quality assurance system at national level and within each university essential for the growth of their institution?
2. According to your experience, which could be a possible **solution to ensure the independency of Quality Assurance Agencies** from the HE Ministry? (Independency on decision, but also financial)
3. From the experience acquired working with our partners, we concluded that a more intensive exchange of external experts among the three countries would be highly beneficial for them. If there is any QAA agency in the room, would you be interested to join the *Western Balkans Regional Observatory for Quality Assurance*? Do you know this initiative?

Questions for Bosnia and Herzegovina (quality assurance system in general):

1. Do you think a **unification of National and Local regulations** in quality assurance would be possible? Would it be a solution for harmonising QA systems at HEIs or do you think it will not be a correct approach for the Bosnia and Herzegovina context?

Questions for the Republic of Macedonia (quality assurance system in general):

1. How could we foster **transparency** and **publicity of information**?
2. What do you think is the best strategy to have a **QAA really committed** and thinking on the real quality of its HEIs?
3. Do you think that more aggressive **staff training** on Macedonia would be a possible solution to overcome the challenges the Board is facing for carrying out the external evaluation and accreditation of its HEIs?



4. How could we make Macedonia understand that **research is a crucial** aspect for each excellent university (at least to be a real university and not a college)
5. How could be the **dedication** of the staff of the Macedonian Board for Accreditation and Evaluation improved and rewarded?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.