



FINAL REPORT

Contact Seminar for the Western Balkans, Tirana

Context

On 24 and 25 October, the European Commission organised a Contact Seminar for the Western Balkans in Tirana, Albania. The event gathered around 250 representatives from higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe and Erasmus+ Partner Countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo*). It offered presentations, workshops and concrete networking opportunities in view of the upcoming 2020 Erasmus+ Call for Proposals.

DAY 1 Thursday, 24 October

Opening, Erasmus+ and regional activities

Minister of Education Youth and Sport of Albania, Ms. Besa Shahini and the **EU Ambassador to Albania** Mr. Luigi Soreca opened the Seminar, and both emphasised the importance of participation in the Erasmus+ programme and the opportunities that the programme represents, also for academics and students in the Western Balkans.

The **European Commission** did two presentations. The first presentation gave an overview of achievements so far in the international dimension of Erasmus+, news for the call 2020 and made some remarks about the prospects of the future programme. Please find more information about the Call 2020 [here](#). Secondly, the EC presented the regional activities that are supported on an annual basis amongst them the strategy for enlargement, different studies ([TIMMS](#), [PIRLS](#), Young Civil Servants Scheme, Pilot VET mobility scheme and the Western Balkans Alumni Association (WBAA).

The Western Balkan Alumni Association

WBAA is a regional network of students and alumni from the Western Balkan region who have spent part of their studies abroad, funded by the EU education and training programmes. WBAA is neutral, unbiased and nonpartisan in the existing political discourse, and supported and funded by the European Commission. WBAA mission is:

- To **advocate** for modernization and improvement of **higher education quality** in the region
- to **empower young people** of the Western Balkans on their academic and career development towards successful employment
- to **strengthen regional** exchange, **collaboration** and integration
- to **support** the regions efforts towards **European integration**

All members of WBAA are volunteers, and they have now 706 registered members. Two of the members presented their experience as former Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees students. You can read more about WBAA [here](#).

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence

Project presentations

The agenda also included the presentations of three Erasmus+ international projects with partners from the Western Balkans: International Credit Mobility, Capacity Building in Higher Education and Jean Monnet network.

The **International Credit Mobility** project is an ongoing mobility project within archaeology between the University of Tirana and the Humboldt University of Berlin. The German project coordinator and his Albanian student demonstrated that ICM is an action that can adjust to the needs of academic disciplines such as archaeology.

The University of Nis presented their experience as project coordinators of a **Capacity Building in Higher Education** project within natural disasters risk management in the Western Balkans. The projects addresses the needs of developing new education, improve the technical capacity and establish efficient systems for better response when natural disasters occur. The partnership consists of a broad range of universities in EU (Austria, UK, Italy, Hungary and Greece) and the Western Balkans (Serbia, Kosovo as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina). The project coordinator emphasised the importance of finding good partners with clear assignment of roles, developing a precisely designed work plan and realistically built budget, as well as the definition of progress indicators. You can read more about the project [here](#).

The **Jean Monnet** project called *Democratization and Reconciliation in the Western Balkans* is composed by five partners: University of New York Tirana, The Centre for Central-Eastern and Balkan Europe, University of Dubrovnik, European Movement in Serbia and the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology. The thematic project questions focus on reconciliation and whether EUs inclusiveness policies have been able to promote democratic values and procedures in the Western Balkans. The project coordinator also provided some recommendations for potential applicants: timing and organisation of the writing process is crucial, have an idealistic approach, take time in choosing your partners and not the least, have fun!

At the end of the plenary session, **Eurydice** presented the status quo of the Bologna process and gave an overview of the higher education systems in Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. You can read more about national education systems [here](#).

In the evening of the first day, Tirana International Hotel hosted the formal dinner and the participants enjoyed Albanian folklore music and dance with great enthusiasm.

DAY 2

Friday, 25 October

Workshops and networking sessions

On day 2 of the event, participants attended workshops and networking sessions. Please find below the operational conclusions from the four workshops International Credit Mobility for beginners/advanced practitioners and Capacity Building in Higher Education for beginners/advanced.

Workshop 1 – First Steps in International Credit Mobility

The workshop focused on providing relevant information for making the first steps in International Credit Mobility (ICM).

It consisted of four parts:

1. **Familiarise with the action.** An overview of what ICM means and how does it work was presented by describing what are the possible kinds of mobilities (student mobility for studies

and for traineeships, staff mobility for teaching and for training), what are the relevant documents needed (Inter-Institutional Agreements, Learning and Mobility Agreements) as well as which grants are offered to participants.

2. **Application process.** The application process for individual HEIs and national mobility consortia was presented as well as the eligibility criteria for partners. An emphasis was put on the importance of cooperation and coordination between partners in order to submit a good project proposal.
3. **Best practices in project implementation.** It was highlighted that the good and regular communication between partners in a project is of great importance along with following the guidelines developed for implementing ICM projects. Special attention was drawn to the elaboration of clear and transparent selection criteria for the participants and the provision of constant support for beneficiaries throughout the project preparation and implementation phases (concerning visa, insurance, accommodation, language support, etc.).
4. **Questions.** Following the presentation of the International Credit mobility action, the participants of the workshop were given the opportunity to ask questions. Some of them comprised topics such as the possibilities to cooperate with non-academic organisations, the specificities of learning agreements and their importance, the different types of grants offered to participants, etc.

Workshop 2 – ICM for advanced practitioners

The spotlight of the workshop was on the different challenges that Program and Partner HEIs are facing during the project elaboration, implementation and results dissemination phases.

Among these challenges are:

- Unpreparedness/unwillingness of HEIs from Program Countries to share Organisational Support budget with Partner countries HEIs.
- Lack of English study program/courses.
- Feeling of discomfort for some professors to teach in English. An app that can provide live translation was mentioned which can be of use for those professors not feeling enough comfortable with their English language competences.
- Difficulties faced by Partner countries in finding partners from Program countries. Possible solutions were given to this challenge including the attendance of contact seminars, professor-to-professor cooperation, etc.
- HEIs confusion on whether the expected impact should differ based on the size of the project. It was explained that the extent of the expected impact and dissemination activities should reflect the scope of project.
- Comparability of courses with the same topic between different HEIs. The expressed concern was whether the students would be able to achieve the same learning outcomes, as they would have if they followed the course at their home university.
- Differences in selection processes of staff for mobility between Program and Partner country HEIs.

Workshop 3 – First Steps in Capacity Building Projects in Higher Education

The workshop was addressed to HEIs with no or little experience on the capacity building in higher education action. The workshop and the following discussions focused on the most important aspects of the CBHE as an activity, as well as on how to start the preparations for collaboration through this funding instrument.

Main features of Capacity Building projects in higher education were discussed, namely:

- **Elaboration of needs analysis:**
 - It is of utmost importance for the project to be based on an existing need in the Partner country. Before elaborating the project proposal, the institution has to get familiar with the education sector plans and strategies on national and institutional levels as well as other projects and initiatives in the same field.
 - The Partner countries should be mainly responsible for elaborating the needs analysis as the focus of CBHE projects is on the partner countries' higher education system.
 - The focus of the project should be defined jointly within the consortium in order to ensure that each member has the same understanding of its objectives and expected results in compliance with the partner's needs.
- **Get to know the CBHE priorities:**
 - Before elaborating the project proposal each partner has to get familiar with the priorities defined for the Partner country/or region.
 - Every CBHE project has to respect formal criteria in order to be eligible for an Erasmus+ grant.
- **Get to know the concepts and project logic:**
 - Every CBHE project proposal has to follow a specific logic and structure.
 - Many guidance materials are available to support the transformation of the project idea into the CBHE project structure.
- **Understand the application package:**
 - The CBHE projects are complex and the application procedure is heavy which requires the allocation of enough time and resources for the preparation of the proposal.
 - Application consists of an electronic application form and its annexes. The main part of the application is the annex Detailed description of the Project.
- **Make use of guidance and previously selected projects:**
 - The use of the guidance for applicants provided by the respective NEO/NA/European Commission is very useful as well as all information on funded projects in previous calls.

Workshop 4 – Building Projects in Higher Education for Advanced Practitioners

The workshop was addressed to “advanced practitioners” in CBHE projects comprising the challenges they are currently facing along with good practices and recommendations.

It was organised around three major topics as follows:

1. Relevance of the project priorities during the whole implementation stage

- a. *Relevance* – issue for multicounty/cross-regional projects given the different country contexts; difficulty of accreditation of new courses that challenges the relevance of the curriculum development projects; lack of understanding of the Logical Framework Matrix (LFM) as a tool for developing and implementing the project.
- b. *Innovative character* – dependent on the country context thus problematic for multicounty projects; lack of evidence-based and convincing formulations regarding the essence of “innovative”.
- c. *Curriculum development* – broad understanding of multidisciplinary creating difficulties in the project reference to a specific subject area; problematic compliance with Bologna process in countries not using ECTS.

2. Management and quality control

- a. *Management of large partnerships* – importance of good preparation of the project proposal and allocation of the responsibilities between the partners; need of consensus on using only the templates available at EACEA implementation package; more support in the partnership between more experienced partners and less experienced ones; usefulness of appointing a regional coordinator; differences in national legislation as the main challenge in managing partnerships; acknowledgment of the cultural specificities of the countries.
- b. *Internal communication* – usefulness of different communication and document storage tools (Moodle, intranet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Dropbox); importance of clear distribution of roles, tasks and deadlines within the partnership; importance of regular meetings; need for online procedures in order to facilitate the signature gathering process from all partners.
- c. *Financial management* – insufficient understanding of the EU conformity criterion and rules of quality regarding equipment purchase; problematic purchases due to VAT exemptions of different institutions; taxation-related issues; different day limitations for staff under the national legislations; high cost for staff taking into account their regular working time and job-related obligations; delay in money transfers from coordinators to partners; need to consider the inflation rate in some countries.
- d. *Quality control* – need of better promotion of the rulebooks among the partners; lack of knowledge about quality assurance in Western Balkans countries due to absence of addressing the matter by the EU partners; need of more training on what project quality represents; non-direct involvement of the committee performing the internal quality control in the project implementation; efficiency of an external evaluator subcontracted during the project implementation; importance of receiving regular feedback from all partners involved in the project; need of establishment of performance indicators at the level of the consortium, hence providing more flexibility during project implementation.

3. Impact and sustainability

a. *Dissemination*

- i. Recommendations: importance of conducting dissemination activities throughout the whole project and afterwards in order to ensure the sustainability of the project results; need to include innovative dissemination methods in addition to the standard ones (web sites, social networks, leaflets, brochures); need to create synergies with similar initiatives in the country, making inter-project coaching, etc., need to broaden the project limited content provided at the websites by including elements/information/reflections pertinent to the topic; involvement of all relevant stakeholders not necessarily participating in the project; need of involvement of management authorities in all dissemination activities; involvement of national authorities; more frequent monitoring of the project after its lifetime.
- ii. Obstacles: lack of commitment from the part of national authorities; lack of ownership from the part of HEIs; lack of training/knowledge on how to disseminate projects results.

b. *Accreditation* – highly variably in the different countries.