

Policy Paper in the framework of E-viva Project “Enhancement and validation of service-related competences in Western Balkan Universities”¹

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Background

After 1990s, higher education institutions in the Western Balkans are making continuous efforts to reform themselves. The higher education system is not isolated, national higher education policy development countries of the Western Balkans seems to be influenced by two major European initiatives in higher education – the Bologna Process and the EU’s Lisbon Strategy (Elken, Gornitzka, Maassen, & Vukasović, 2011). It is important to have in consideration that universities in the Western Balkans are rather young: essentially developed after the Second World War.

Implementation of structural reforms in HE is always a risky and uncertain process, they have been centrally initiated but responsibilities should be shared between all Higher Education partners at different levels. Three waves of legislating are distinguished : - *the first wave* (the 1990s): the existing ‘philosophy’ of HE remained largely the same; *the second wave* (late 1990s – early 2000s): managing the ‘post-conflict’ period and ‘Reintegration into Europe’; *the third wave* (the 2000s): ‘Bologna’ implementation (Zgaga, 2016). On the surface, the most visible feature is expansion and massification of the national HE systems in WB.

In the 2000s, in all of the WB countries, Bologna related reforms of higher education took place, including changes in legislation and also changes in funding arrangements, and in curricula. However, there was the situation that whatever the Bologna Process proposes the legislators or government officials quickly put into law. The rapid increase in the number of students from 2005 until today, has met the target for massification, but, of course occurring before a rapid increase, has highlighted numerous problems which converge to a single point: quality (Musai, 2012).

Through Bologna Process, using the concept of competencies as a basis for learning outcomes is already the most appropriate way to formulate study programs. It is necessary to distinguish learning outcomes from competencies and to distinguish also the different roles of key actors in higher education: academic staff and students. Desired learning outcomes are formulated by academic staff, while competencies are acquired or developed from students during the learning process. Using the concept of competencies as a basis for learning outcomes is a relatively complex process and requires capacity building within the HEI.

One of the great challenges of the university system is to demonstrate capacity for adaptation to the changes in today’s society and its new demands, in which the concept of profession focuses on what are called professional competencies. Students are expected to develop diverse competences during their studies at the university, and previous studies have also indicated that many of these competences do actually develop at university (Keneley & Jackling, 2011). Research also shows

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that university students develop theoretical knowledge rather than academic competences (Monteiro, Almeida, & Garcia-Aracil, 2016). Competence-based learning approaches in Higher education (HE) are still underdeveloped, demonstrating the need to share and accumulate more academic experiences, further Western Balkan universities need to build their capacity in this direction. At the same time, various digital environments and ICT tools emerge, successfully supporting the design, implementation and evaluation of Competence Based Learning.

The society is moving more and more in a direction in which we all operate in increasingly personalized work learning environment. This requires a new approach to education, new and different competences from both learners and teachers, as well as the adaptation of approaches to teaching and learning. The new approach to education also means a change in university culture, a significant impact upon the professional identity of lecturers, and also sets new pedagogical challenges fundamentally aimed at the adoption of active methodologies which prioritize the constant participation of students in their learning process.

E-Viva Project Overview

E-VIVA is an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education project, led by European University of Tirana, Albania and 16 partners all geographically from Europe. Project started in 2019 and the main aim was the creation of a blended learning approach to facilitate and validate competence developments related to service orientation in rather informal learning contexts in higher education institutes and workplace learning contexts in Western Balkan Universities. E-VIVA was related according CBHE Priority to “Recognition of Qualifications & Qualification Framework (regional priority)” and it developed a cross-cutting educational approach to create, assess and evidence learning outcomes as innovative validation method².

The objectives of the project were: Research on approaches to create and validate service oriented skills and competences; Enriching existing validation and certification systems through: connection with existing EQF-based validation and certification systems, extracurricular activities in higher education including internships, learning activities at the work place and/or internships and learning in mobility, career counselling activities in the respective universities, including the Alumni association; Developing and refining overarching ICT-based assessment and validation systems; Applying a rich competence development and validation software for service related skills and competences; Piloting and Evaluation³.

In the framework of e-VIVA, web-based learning and validation platform applied for a number of 300 licences in WBC enabling learners and validators to evidence developments of service related personal and social skills in a process oriented way.

The Partners of the Project were: European University of Tirana – Albania; die Berater@ Unternehmensberatung GmbH / dB – Austria; Blended learning institutions’ cooperative / blinc eG – Germany; University of Duisburg Essen – Germany; Universidade Nova de Lisboa – Portugal; Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje – North Macedonia; Mother Teresa University – North Macedonia; University of Sarajevo – Bosnia & Herzegovina; University Sarajevo School of Science and Technology - Bosnia & Herzegovina; University of Elbasan “Aleksandër Xhuvani” – Albania; Universum College – Kosovo; University “Kadri Zeka” Gjilan – Kosovo; University of Novi Sad – Serbia; University of Niš – Serbia; University of Donja Gorica – Montenegro; University of Montenegro – Montenegro.

² <https://evivaproject.eu/project-overview-2/>

³ <https://evivaproject.eu/project-overview-2/>

Conclusions & Recommendations

A conclusion of this project, where through a methodology based on desk research, interviews, questionnaires as well as all the experience created through the training of the staff included in the project for all WB universities, and then the university staff and students may to conclude as follows:

It must be noted that there is an overall shortage in qualified people. The shortage is visible in terms of expertise because of demographic reasons, stemming mainly from the young university graduates leaving the country to work and live abroad. The shortage of qualified people is also visible in terms of possession of service-related competencies. However, entrepreneurs and managers are very well aware of the importance of these competencies.

The research conducted in and by the Western Balkan universities participating in the e-VIVA project, through the online questionnaires and interviews, clearly indicated that the service-related competencies are recognized as an important concept. The surveys showed that respondents were familiar with the overall service-related competencies and consider them to be very important. Their opinions emphasised the fact that such competencies could benefit individuals in many ways, including their personal development, career advancement and professional development. They also emphasised that such competencies can significantly help them to better navigate the job market.

The respondents from the Western Balkan countries consider their respective countries to still be in a transition period from the centrally planned state-owned economy to the free market economy. They also think that the service-related competencies are still underdeveloped.

A very high percentage of respondents were not familiar with the validation of service-related competencies. However, they considered validation as an important and necessary step for the formal recognition of service-related competencies.

The overall research has shown that there is a deficiency of appropriate connections between the higher education sector and business enterprises in the Western Balkan countries. In fact, the general perception is that the business enterprises seem to stay away from cooperating with universities.

The respondents were mostly unaware and unfamiliar with programs that promote the acquisition of service related competencies. A very high percentage of respondents were not familiar with the validation of service related competencies, but they considered validation as an important and necessary step for the formal recognition;

The workplace and internships and traineeships are presented as the best options for learning about service related competencies; higher than mobility or voluntary work. The respondents rated vocational education and training and higher education as very important to acquire the SRC, higher than adult or school education.

Competence Oriented Learning and Validation is a rather new concept which goes along an

innovative idea of teaching and learning. The stakeholders should understand the need of a paradigm shift from traditional teaching to competence oriented learning, to a more learner centered educational approach which is neither common in the EU member states nor in the Western Balkan countries. The purpose of validation is to make visible the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, more transparent and comparable.

Competence Oriented Learning implies some challenges for stakeholders in service economy. Challenges for HEI are: flexible curricula, internships and projects connect with real business. Challenges for the Business partners: Where and how to implement concept of the e- VIVA project with interns.

Recommendations

Policymakers, researchers and other education actors in the Western Balkan countries must initiate a discussion on approaches and solutions related to practicing the competency-based teaching and learning. The COVID-19 crisis reinforced such needs and opened new questions for education actors. In order to reach the full potential of competency-based learning, education actors must work hard to gain service-oriented and digital competencies, spend more time in self-reflection, focus on long-term planning and development, engage in discussion with peers, students, and available experts.

Education must respond to the needs and challenges of circular economy in order to become less formal and more flexible, more open and participatory. The education system needs to offer a multitude of entry gates for adult learners with interfaces between the formal and informal sector.

The potential of the competency-based learning for the overall improvement of the quality of education is significant, but only if techniques and tools are wisely chosen and used efficiently with the appropriate pedagogical approaches. That is needed in order to avoid the waste of normally insufficient resources available for the education sector.

The Western Balkan universities should develop and improve their curricula and syllabuses based on competency-based learning and teaching and especially based on Level 5 with the aim that in the future most students graduating equipped with service-related competencies. Higher education institutions in Western Balkan countries can use the Level 5 methodology for different competencies (such as service-related, entrepreneurship and others) in order to reflect on their curricula, syllabuses, internships, projects, etc. This approach could also be very effectively used for formative assessment of acquired competencies.

However, both state-funded agencies or institutions and private businesses should team up together in increasing the level of service-related competencies right away (instead of waiting for the effects of reformed curricula and syllabuses) either through short courses, tutorials and workshops or through cooperation with higher education institutions where businesses offer scholarships, internships and mentorships to students, mostly those in the domain of information technology or tourism.

The following institutions in Western Balkan countries should benefit from these

recommendations; ministries of education, the institutes or agencies for education quality and evaluation, the chambers of commerce, universities, enterprises, training agencies involved in the competency-based learning.

The agencies for the quality in higher education could recommend the establishment of programs in higher education institutions based on the Level 5 methodology, as well as engage in a promotional campaign for raising awareness about the importance of the Level 5 methodology with all stakeholders (state institutions, business sector and higher education institutions). The public institutions, at the central and local level, as well as international organization should provide financial support for the adoption of the Level 5 methodology and assist in additional training for lectures or trainer.

The service economy is rapidly growing and there is a strong need for service-related competencies. Provision of such competencies can be successfully achieved only by including all the relevant stakeholders in the process. The governments should support the business sector which is collaborating with the universities and which are involved in the education process. A combination of learning from both enterprises and universities will not only bridge the gap between the theory and practice but also provide a better understanding of what enterprises demand. The universities should define the courses or modules, which create service-related competencies and apply the Level 5 methodology for their enhancement and validation.

The collaboration among Western Balkan countries and Western Balkan universities should be enhanced with the aim of exchanging the good practices and to support each other. The integration of the Western Balkans countries into the European Union requires very important political, legal, and economic reforms. Education remains one of our most important sectors funded by the European Union and the success of this sector affects all other sectors since it contributes to the preparation of the workforce serving the needs of the economic development of the respective countries. The implementation of the e-VIVA project methodology in higher education creates premises for improving the quality of education and meeting the needs of the labour market at local, regional and international level.

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Links

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