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INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA AS FRAMEWORK FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT POPULATION

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Abstract: *In the past, higher education in Republika Srpska was relatively independent. Yet today it is being influenced by a variety of international political and economic forces that strive to improve the quality of higher education and provide opportunities for students from other countries to pursue their studies abroad. The Bologna Declaration, the Lisbon Recognition Convention and European Standards in Higher Education are just a few examples of documents that have provided the framework for higher education reform in Republika Srpska. Along with these documents, Republica Srpska has created its own standards for quality assurance. While all these corresponding guidelines have been adopted as part of the formal education system, the actual application is fragmented with respect to student mobility and access, as well as the connection between the education system and the needs of the labour market. Thus, how well the institutional development of higher education can determine the successful implementation of these international documents into practical, student-oriented practices. Improved support services, mentoring systems, opportunities for practical learning and learning through digital technologies are examples of how higher education can enhance the student experience and provide better learning outcomes. In addition to developing new student-focused operational policies, additional institutional reform in terms of funding, governance and collaboration with external stakeholders is needed to ensure that higher education in Republika Srpska is able to sustain itself into the future. By aligning international standards with local needs and implementing those standards, Republika Srpska's higher education system will be able to better meet the needs of students, employers, and society.*
Keywords: *international frameworks, higher education, Bologna Process, student development, quality assurance, education reform*

Introduction

In modern society, higher education is essential for the development of society economically, socially and technologically. The role of universities is very different today than it used to be, universities are not just sources of information but are also important contributors to innovation, preparation of skilled workers and global collaboration. Thus, the way higher education systems develop worldwide is increasingly influenced by international agreements that attempt to create a standardization of quality, facilitate mobility and encourage global collaboration (Altbach, 2013). For smaller or developing higher education systems such as Republika Srpska, international documents represent a very important reference for reforming and modernising. By basing their national policies on internationally established guidelines, institutions can create greater transparency, establish comparability of

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qualifications for students to make use of global academic networks. However, the mere existence of such frameworks does not guarantee any improvement in the quality of higher education because the achievement of improved outcomes will depend on the degree to which they are enacted into practice and the extent to which they are adapted to local institutional and social conditions. Republika Srpska has formally accepted several international higher education principles, particularly those associated with the European Higher Education Area, including structural reform and quality assurance systems, as well as policies that promote student mobility. Nevertheless, there are still many challenges associated with turning these frameworks into tangible improvements in student experiences.

Key international documents in higher education

Several international conventions and frameworks are key players in shaping the current development of modern higher education systems. These include establishing a set of standards for education at an international level, promoting cooperation among different countries' higher education systems and providing guidance on reforming institutions within those systems. Among these conventions, the Bologna Process (established by the Bologna Declaration in 1999) is arguably the most significant because it sets out parameters for an area of European Higher Education Area - EHEA. The primary goal of the Bologna Process is to develop a system of higher education that is comparable and compatible across participating countries using a three-cycle degree system (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral), ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) and mechanisms to facilitate the mobility of students as well as the recognition of their qualifications. The Bologna Process provides for the structural reform of higher education and is a strategic initiative to enhance quality, transparency and employability of graduates (Keeling 2006).

Another convention that is closely related to the Bologna Process is the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) which focuses specifically on the recognition of higher education qualifications across international boundaries. The LRC establishes both legal and institutional frameworks that provide for the recognition of diplomas or study periods earned in one country as having been earned in another country unless substantial differences are established to exist. As a result of these legal and institutional frameworks, the LRC facilitates the mobility of students from one country to another to complete their education as well as to provide support for the progression of students from one institution to another by reducing administrative barriers to recognition of qualifications and by providing for increased trust between educational systems (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997).

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) governance structure relies heavily on its quality assurance system, which is guided by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). They help universities define how to assess, monitor and improve their level of student learning through using internal quality assurance processes, external evaluations and a strong student role in certifying the quality of their institution. The ESG framework developed by ENQA is meant to ensure that there are consistency and accountability in higher education institutions across Europe, while still allowing for some flexibility in how they implement ESG (ENQA, 2015).

In addition to ESG, there are numerous other programs and initiatives that complement and support the internationalization and development of higher education institutions. Arguably one of the most comprehensive and significant is the Erasmus+ programme, which facilitates the international mobility of students and academic staff, fosters academic collaboration between institutions and develops long-term partnerships between institutions within the wider European Union and outside of it. In addition to providing an opportunity for students to gain international experience and develop their intercultural

competencies through exchange, joint degrees and collaborative projects, Erasmus+ also provides various types of support to institutions to promote internationalization (European Commission, 2021). Another important program is the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EQF is designed to be a reference point for comparing qualifications between national qualification systems. The EQF defines eight reference levels based on learning outcomes, thereby facilitating consistency and transparency of qualifications and, consequently, making it easier for students and employers to compare and recognize skills from different countries (European Parliament & Council, 2008).

Higher education strategy of Republika Srpska

Republika Srpska's strategy for higher educational development establishes framework for defining institutional reforms, aligning with international standards and setting long-term priorities for higher education development. Thus, the strategic document focuses on updating the current higher education system and enhancing the quality of educational instruction while increasing the overall integration with the European Higher Education Area. Furthermore, the strategy embodies many of the principles outlined in international documents, especially relating to the Bologna Process, including the three-cycle system of academic qualifications, the recognition of ECTS credits, and the promotion of mobility among students (Ministry of Scientific and Technological Development, Higher Education and Information Society of Republika Srpska, 2022). A central component of the developed strategy focuses on increasing the quality and relevance of higher educational offerings. Specifically, this will include improvement of the curriculum, enhancement of academic qualifications and enhancement of competencies so graduates can better meet the workforce's needs. Additionally, the developed strategy identifies the need to develop practical skills, actively engage in cooperative partnerships between industry and universities and utilise more applied forms of learning. Although the intended goals of the strategy are clearly delineated, the degree to which they are being implemented is not consistent across all educational institutions. There are notable discrepancies, particularly regarding the inclusion of practical learning components in degree programs. Internationalization is another key priority of the strategy. To promote international exchange and mobility of students and faculty, it outlines ways to participate in international exchange programs, collaborate with overseas universities and increase the amount of student and staff interaction with international academic institutions. Additionally, by exposing students to international academic settings, the strategy supports both the personal and professional development of students. Unfortunately, there remains a gap between the number of students who are involved in international exchange programs and the intent of the strategy, as the actual number of participants is much lower than anticipated. Quality assurance and institutional accountability are also addressed in the higher education strategy. The strategy calls for the establishment of internal and external evaluation processes based upon established European quality assurance standards to enable the ongoing improvement of education delivery and related factors (teaching performance, student satisfaction, learning outcomes). However, quality assurance is frequently viewed as a box-ticking exercise rather than a mechanism for meaningful improvement to support the quality and effectiveness of education. To summarize, the higher education strategy of Republika Srpska reflects a solid commitment to developing an internationally compliant system of higher education. The underlying principles of the strategy support the modernization of higher education institutions, provide for quality assurance, promote international cooperation and facilitate international academic mobility. However, effective implementation, improved institutional capacity and an increased focus on improving student experiences are required to achieve the desired results of the higher education strategy of Republika Srpska.

Gap analysis: International standards and reality in Republika Srpska

Republika Srpska has adopted key global standards for tertiary education however, there is an apparent discrepancy between the academic framework and their actual application in the nation's higher educational institutions. International guidelines and frameworks, such as the Bologna Declaration and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), promote student-centred learning, mobility and continuous improvement of quality, but still many of these principles have not been fully realized. For example: student mobility. There are several ways to create student mobility, including through the Erasmus+ program however, students from Republika Srpska who participate in the Erasmus+ program are at a much lower rate than the number of student mobility opportunities exist. The reasons for this could be that there is a lack of support provided by the institutions to assist students in moving abroad, limited access to accurate and reliable information on study abroad opportunities, the financial burden of participating in study abroad programs and a lack of appropriate institutional recognition for students who have spent time studying abroad. As a result, the number of students who have participated in exchange programs and who can demonstrate intercultural competencies, and academic diversity has not significantly increased. Another major area that has not been fully implemented is the credit system, specifically ECTS and curriculum structure. ECTS has the potential to provide a standard measure for evaluating student workload and achievement however, ECTS is often not used to measure students' actual workloads or outcomes. Most courses are still designed using traditional methods, such as lecture-based coursework, rather than using interactive methods of learning, critical thinking skills or experiences that are applicable to the real world. This lack of implementation of ECTS diminishes the academic integrity of the Bologna principle of student-centred education. There are discrepancies within the quality assurance process. Even though there are official evaluation processes, they are viewed as technical procedures and not as a means of improving quality overall. Student feedback is not always collected to improve teaching and learning quality and when external evaluations are conducted, they often do not lead to appropriate actions. In addition, there is a disconnect between higher education and the job market. There are international strategies that focus on employability and practicality however, many degree programs in Republika Srpska still provide a limited number of practical experiences or partnerships with industry. This creates a divide between academic and actual workforce. These challenges demonstrate that what is lacking are appropriate frameworks however, they have been applied consistently and partially. To close this gap, there must be a shift from formal compliance to an approach that uses a student-centred focus when implementing practices.

Development strategies based on international frameworks

The international frameworks, such as the Bologna Process and ESG, highlight the need for student-centred learning, support services and employability. However, these general principles need to be made specific to the students through measurable criteria that significantly impact them. A significant strategy to achieve this goal is to establish psychological support centres on university campuses as part of student services. Research has shown that student well-being is directly related to their retention and academic success. As noted by Stallman (2010), students who have access to structured mental health support experience less stress and perform better academically. To meet the recommendations of international student support systems for higher education institutions in the Republic of Srpska, universities should have a system of readily available counselling services, workshops on stress management and peer support groups. Another effective measure for assisting students is the establishment of mentorship programs (or “buddy” systems), where senior students or alumni help new students navigate through the academic and social challenges of college life. These

types of mentorship programs are commonly used in many universities in Europe, where they enhance student integration and reduce dropout rates. According to Colvin and Ashman (2010), peer mentorship improves both student academic engagement and sense of belonging. It is essential to ensure more students get involved in international mobility programs than currently do. Erasmus+ is a framework which lays out how international mobility is achieved, but institutions need to take the necessary steps to help students through improved information flow, better financial assistance and simplified administrative processes. Research shows that students participating in mobility programs develop problem-solving skills, adaptability and greater employability (European Commission, 2019) Therefore, providing greater mobility opportunities will directly support both students' personal and professional development. Universities also need to improve career development services such as organizing job fairs, internship programs, both local and international company partnerships. As per Yorke (2006), students have increased employability when academic education is combined with practical experience. Embedding internships into degree programs will enhance the fit between educational requirements and the needs of the labour market. There is also a need for greater digitalisation of student service delivery models. Evidence from international examples shows that institutions can achieve greater efficiency and student satisfaction using a centralised digital approach to course management, communication and administration.

Selwyn (2016) noted that digital technologies are providing the flexibility and accessibility required within contemporary learning contexts. One of the most critical actions is to incorporate project-based learning into the curriculum. Courses should include opportunities to solve real-world problems by collaborating with businesses or government agencies instead of primarily offering theoretical lectures. Researchers have shown that students who learn actively with project-based methods have better understanding and can retain knowledge for longer periods (Prince, 2004).

This also matches with the international emphasis on developing practical skills and being able to think critically. Another specific step is to create university innovation hubs and incubators for students. These facilities allow students to develop all kinds of business ideas, work together with people from other disciplines and learn about entrepreneurship. Universities that foster innovation ecosystems contribute to both student success and regional economic development (Etzkowitz, 2008). Establishing these types of hubs in Republika Srpska would allow higher education to be in sync with global trends toward knowledge-based economies, it would also provide students with options other than traditional jobs. Another area that requires improvement is academic advising systems. Many students have little indication how to choose their classes, what to do with their careers, or how to make progress in school. Developing structured advising systems where every student is assigned to an academic advisor can help students perform better and reduce their chances of dropping out. Kuh (2005) states that having ongoing help through advising is one of the strongest predictors of increased student motivation and academic success. The establishment of interdisciplinary courses is an important, practical initiative that provides students with collaborative learning opportunities. As a result of increasing demand in today's job markets for workers with skills that exceed traditional academic disciplines, there has been significant support for interdisciplinary education.

Klein (2010) states that interdisciplinary education helps students develop critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity skills and prepares them to meet the real-world needs that exist as they leave the university. Implementing the above strategies demonstrates that international frameworks may support improvement of the overall student experience. Success will require the institutions to exhibit a commitment to student-centred development by implementing the above strategies consistently.

Institutional and policy recommendations

The need for more student-cantered approaches is recognized, but significant changes at the institutional and policymaking levels are necessary to achieve sustainable development in higher education in the Republic of Srpska. Funding models, governance structures and different actors in the system all play a role in how long-term development occurs as outlined by the international frameworks. One recommendation for change is the improvement of funding allocation methods. The way that funding has been allocated until now has used historical criteria to determine how much money to distribute to universities rather than looking at how successful a university has been or what its outcomes are. If funding sources were implemented using performance-based measures as they are in many European countries, universities would have a greater incentive to improve their teaching, research and job placement services for students. As Salmi and Hauptman (2006) indicate, well-designed funding systems can provide powerful incentives for institutional development, assuming they are transparent and consistent with national priorities. Another area that should receive attention is fostering cooperation between universities and industry. Numerous international reports state that aligning education with labour market needs is important. This can be accomplished by establishing formal partnerships between corporations and universities, developing curricula together and creating mandatory internship programs for students. Research indicates that strong cooperation between universities and businesses positively impacts the employability of graduates and provides smoother transitions from school to work (OECD, 2019). Cooperative efforts are still very limited in Republika Srpska however, they must grow systematically across the board. It is important to continue developing academic staff within the university. Many universities use lecture-based teaching methods with minimal interactive or digital techniques. Regular professional development for professors, including current teaching methods and digital technology, will improve the quality of instruction. According to Gibbs and Coffey (2004), structured professional development for university educators has a positive effect on both student learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness. Quality assurance mechanisms also need to be better enforced. In many cases, frameworks like the ESG are used as formal documents but often their implementation is either superficial or not adhered to by many universities. After the completion of an external evaluation, universities should be required to submit an action plan to improve their institution. This would convert quality assurance from just a formal obligation to a realistic mechanism to facilitate positive change. In addition, universities should focus on the digitalisation of their administrative and academic processes. Universities would benefit from digital systems that are effective in streamlining processes such as student enrolment, course management and communication between students and universities. Digital transformation increases operational efficiency, according to the European University Association (2020), and provides for a more flexible and accessible model of education. The investment in digital infrastructure would promote positive improvements in administrative performance and student experience in Republika Srpska. The above recommendations for institutional and policy improvements indicate that achieving substantial reform will require a coordinated approach. All effective reforms require agencies working together in a systematic manner.

Digitalization and internationalization as drivers of student development

Digitalization and internationalization are two interconnected processes that affect the accessibility and quality of higher education. There are also many international frameworks that highlight how digital technologies contribute to student learning, mobility and collaboration among institutions. One aspect of digitalization is the move toward hybrid and online learning. Universities are adopting learning platforms to allow students access to course materials, participate in discussions and complete

assignments remotely. This gives students more flexibility and better supports those students who learn through different methods of learning than they typically would when attending a physical school. As Bates (2019) states, students who participate in hybrid and online courses are likely to experience greater levels of engagement if they also engage in interactive teaching methods and have a clear framework. The expansion of hybrid learning systems within Republika Srpska would improve access to higher education for students between work and study or to other responsibilities. In addition to creating opportunities for learning through digital means, digital tools also support the internationalization of higher education by providing opportunities for students to experience virtual mobility. Although there continue to be physical exchange programs, such as Erasmus +, the use of virtual mobility to connect universities allows many more students to participate in international experiences. For example, students can participate in online joint courses, attend guest lectures provided by professors from other countries and collaborate on projects with students from other countries while developing their own intercultural competencies. The European Commission (2020) cites research evidence that virtual exchange programmes provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers, while also removing barriers to mobility, such as the cost of travel, accommodation and travel logistics.

Digital systems for academic and administrative activities represent another important area of improvement in higher education today. Centralized systems such as enrolment, grading, communication and feedback allow institutions to improve transparency and efficiency as well as collect data about student success to identify issues and enhance teaching methods. According to Selwyn (2016), Data-Informed Decision Making is a critical characteristic of current higher education systems. Digitalization also supports lifelong learning, which is a primary goal of international educational strategies. The use of online courses, micro-credentials, and flexible learning pathways enables students to continue to develop and advance their skills even after graduating from traditional degree programs. This is especially important as jobs are constantly changing and demand creativity and adaptability to meet those changing needs. Successful digitalization of institutions requires an adequate level of infrastructure, training for faculty, and a clearly defined strategy from the institution. Without these factors, digital tools will be under-utilized and ineffective. Investment in technology is not enough by itself to improve educational outcomes, investment in developing and integrating capacity into teaching practice must also be made. In summary, digitalization and internationalization are two types of practical pathways to improve the quality of higher education in Republika Srpska. By combining technological advances with global collaboration, institutions have the potential to create increased levels of opportunity for their students, provide higher quality learning and better prepare students to fully participate in an increasingly interdependent world.

Conclusion

The Republic of Srpska offers an academic experience shaped by significant international agreements, including the Bologna Accord, the Lisbon Recognition Convention and European principles for quality assurance and student mobility. While international agreements laid a strong basis for modernisation of tertiary education in the Republic of Srpska, they have not yet delivered maximum potential in terms of practical application. The realisation of the full potential of these international standards via formal compliance with international standards remains the biggest barrier. The development of a successful higher education system depends on the ability to implement the best practices of these documents and transform the principles set forth in international standards into tangible student-focused experiences. Examples include improving student experience and outcomes through enhancing psychological support, academic mentoring systems, practical application of

learning and increasing the opportunity for international mobility. As well as supporting the long-term sustainability of the Republic of Srpska through institutional reforms associated with funding, governance and labour market cooperation. Digitalisation and internationalisation will broaden opportunities for students, including improving access, enhancing flexibility and providing global engagement. Still, for these opportunities to be fully realised, adequate and coordinated strategic investment must be made. In summary, developing a higher education system in the Republic of Srpska is accomplished through not only adopting international standards, but also implementing and consistently applying them in real-life settings. By concentrating on implementing these standards, anticipating student needs and aligning with global best practices, the republic's higher education system will increase its competitiveness and inclusivity in responding to the challenges of today.

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MEĐUNARODNI DOKUMENTI VISOKOG OBRAZOVANJA U REPUBLICI SRPSKOJ KAO OKVIR ZA RAZVOJ STUDENTSKE POPULACIJE

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Apstrakt: *U prošlosti, visoko obrazovanje u Republici Srpskoj bilo je relativno nezavisno. Pa ipak, danas je pod uticajem raznih međunarodnih političkih i ekonomskih sila koje teže poboljšanju kvaliteta visokog obrazovanja i pružanju mogućnosti studentima iz drugih zemalja da nastave studije u inostranstvu. Bolonjska deklaracija, Lisabonska konvencija o priznavanju i Evropski standardi u visokom obrazovanju su samo neki od primjera dokumenata koji su pružili okvir za reformu visokog obrazovanja u Republici Srpskoj. Uz ove dokumente, Republika Srpska je kreirala sopstvene standarde za obezbeđivanje kvaliteta. Iako su sve ove odgovarajuće smernice usvojene kao deo formalnog obrazovnog sistema, stvarna primena je fragmentirana u pogledu mobilnosti i pristupa studenata, kao i veze između obrazovnog sistema i potreba tržišta rada. Stoga, koliko dobro institucionalni razvoj visokog obrazovanja može odrediti uspešnu implementaciju ovih međunarodnih dokumenata u praktičnu, studentski orijentisanu praksu. Poboljšane usluge podrške, sistemi mentorstva, mogućnosti za praktično učenje i učenje putem digitalnih tehnologija su primeri kako visoko obrazovanje može poboljšati iskustvo studenata i pružiti bolje ishode učenja. Pored razvoja novih operativnih politika usmerenih na studente, potrebne su dodatne institucionalne reforme u pogledu finansiranja, upravljanja i saradnje sa spoljnim zainteresovanim stranama kako bi se osiguralo da visoko obrazovanje u Republici Srpskoj može da se održi u budućnosti. Usklađivanjem međunarodnih standarda sa lokalnim potrebama i primjenom tih standarda, sistem visokog obrazovanja u Republici Srpskoj moći će bolje da zadovolji potrebe studenata, poslodavaca i društva.*

Ključne reči: *međunarodni okviri, visoko obrazovanje, Bolonjski proces, razvoj studenata, osiguranje kvaliteta, reforma obrazovanja*