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Establishing and capacity building of the Southern Serbian Academy and the National Conference for Vocational Higher Education (ECBAC)

REPORT ON THE 8th MEETING HELD IN PROKUPLJE, NOVEMBER, 2013

The eighth meeting within the implementation of the TEMPUS ECBAC 517200 project entitled ***Establishing and capacity building of the Southern Serbian Academy and the National Conference for Vocational Higher Education*** was held in Prokuplje, 26th and 27th November, 2013. The host of the meeting was College of Agriculture and Food Technology in Prokuplje, Serbia. The meeting was attended by the representatives of Kaho Sint Lieven from Belgium (Andre Govaert and Geert De Lepeleer), IPP from Portugal (Mónica Vieira), Aalen, Germany (Nichola Adams), as well as the School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers in Kruševac (Aleksandar Vasić, Zoran Vasić and Ivan Tomić), School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers in Pirot (Sanja Kovačević, Danijela Vidanović, Emilija Popović and Marina Milanović), College of Agriculture and Food Technology from Prokuplje (Nikola Stolić, Saša Petrović and Ivica Stančić), College of Textile from Leskovac (Đorđe Miltenović and Suzana Đorđević), School of Higher Chemical Technology from Kruševac (Mladen Nikolić, Nebojša Arsić and Zorana Milosavljević), High Medical School of Professional Studies in Ćuprija (Milan Sretenović, Antić Dragan, Gordana Knežević and Tatjana Simović), The School of Higher Technical Professional Education from Niš (Dejan Blagojević, Aleksandra Boričić, Radomir Cekic, Irina Cenić and Danica Milošević), School of Higher Applied Professional Education from Vranje (Nenad Janjić, Gordana Mrdak, Ljiljana Đorđević, and Svetlana Trajković). For the first time, the meeting was attended by a representative of the Ministry of Education which delegated Mrs. Lela Rudić on this occasion. Also, the representatives of the NTO, Mr. Bojan Latinović and Mrs. Marija Filipović-Ožegović were present during the second day of the meeting.

After the welcoming speech of the director of the College of Agriculture and Food Technology, Mr. Saša Petrović who said a couple of words on the history of the College as well as its actual study programmes and laboratories, Mr. Andre Govaert briefly presented the items on the agenda.

When the report on the meeting held in Niš in October 2013 was unanimously approved of, it was proceeded with the presentations which were planned for the first day of the meeting.

Mrs. Sanja Kovačević from the School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers in Pirot gave a presentation on the evaluation of the study visits to Ghent, Aalen and Porto. The purpose of this presentation was to point out to all the similarities and differences in the work of the four services relevant for the Academy among universities in Ghent, Aalen and Porto which were visited by the retraining team from Serbia. Moreover, this presentation also gave suggestions how the Serbian Academy should organize its services based on the examples of good practice. The re-training team had the opportunity to see that the partner institutions in Ghent, Aalen and Porto dedicate a lot of attention to applied research and practical training, that they have very elaborate student service, that they establish very strong connections with the labour market and industry and have a very well organized service for international cooperation, which are all the fields that our colleges within the Academy should work on.

Based on the examples of good integrative practice seen in Ghent, Aalen and Porto, it became obvious that the Serbian Academy must first of all establish stronger ties with industry and market, start cooperation with similar colleges abroad, make students even more visible on the market and get them involved even more in the decision-making processes. Crucial thing is to set the unique quality assurance policy for quality standards and procedures, bearing in mind all the differences among the members of the ACAS. In order to be able to establish functional services, it is absolutely necessary to make initiative for projects with industry, sign bilateral agreements with other colleges in Europe, apply for various international projects, get students more involved in common activities and projects, adjust the curricula until the next accreditation period and introduce soft skill courses. Although we might lack finances, we do not lack intellectual and organisational potentials. By gaining useful guidelines from the European partners we are able to perceive our strengths and weaknesses and strive for overall improvement.

Next presentation was also given by Mrs. Sanja Kovačević who talked about the mission, vision, strategic, operational goals and the organization of the IRO. The purpose of the IRO is to make our institutions more recognizable at the international level. That is why this service should be responsible for signing bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, which would eventually lead to greater opportunities for teacher and staff mobility. Mission of the IRO would be to contribute to richer cultural life and personality development, economic growth and societal well-being, quality improvement, technological innovation and many other things which will make us part of the European higher education area. Some of the important goals of the IRO would be to improve the language and study skills of international students and provide them assistance in adapting to the life in our country as well as providing them administrative support. Furthermore, the service would be in charge of fostering cross-cultural communication between our colleges and the local community, setting the highest standards of language instruction and building the image of the Academy as an international, multicultural learning community. Part of the action plan is to establish an IR rulebook, develop a financial plan, select the project teams and organize intensive courses of foreign languages. By the end of 2014, it is planned to have some cooperation agreements signed.

Dejan Blagojević , director of The School of Higher Technical Professional Education from Niš was the next presenter. He talked about the Academy quality framework. The vision of the Academy is to become an outstanding institution, highly appreciated by the community of staff, students, alumni, donors and partners, which will provide an outstanding education. At the same time the Academy will be committed to leadership in advancement, dissemination and application of knowledge within and across disciplines, achieving maximum societal and economic benefits through achievements in education, research, discovery and collaboration, with the strong vision to operate ethically and with the highest standards of efficiency. It is important to invest sufficiently today to sustain the vision for future generations, says the presenter. Mission of the Academy is to reinforce and improve the existing and build new capacities of the colleges which are members of the ACAS and strengthen the position of each of the mentioned institutions. Also, the Academy should contribute to better recognition oh higher vocational education in the Republic of Serbia. Its goal will be to create efficient services for the students and the teaching staff and improve work and financial results of each institution. The establishment of the Academy however, depends on the decision of the Ministry. Law on Higher Education does not define precisely the role of the Academy and there are two problematic articles in the law which needs to be reconsidered. Due to these obstacles we must turn to plan B which implies the establishment of the 4 services for the time being until the Academy is formed as a legal body. Some of the urgent operational goals would be to form the governing and supervisory bodies, develop the standards for accreditation, establish IRO, Student service, ICT service and QA service and form promo teams.

Activities planned by the action plan are: making amendments to the statutes of the ACAS members, signing a declaration on the unique policy in the defined areas, preparing a draft of standards for

accreditation, making amendments to the financial plans with the estimated amount of funds for the work and functioning of the newly formed bodies, implementing the activities of the four services and organising a roundtable with stakeholders.

The presentation on the quality framework of the student service was given by Mr. Milan Sretenović from High Medical School of Professional Studies in Ćuprija. He started his presentation by explaining that the student service is a kind of service which cannot be identified with the student administration we have in Serbia. The mission of the student service would be to improve the quality of studying and the quality of students' life by providing support to students, helping them to integrate into new environment and organizing extra-curricular activities for students. Each college should have its unit for student service which would be a safe harbor for the students. To organize a good quality student service, it is necessary to have the support from the government as well as the legal and financial support, to have good logistics and a reliable network. Some of the strategic goals are to make a web presentation of the student service, start close cooperation with the local services and establish intensive communication with the teaching staff and student organizations, student parliament and their representatives. Students should also be given a chance to take part in the student service. The action plan for the student service stresses the importance of electing coordinators or chief student officers at each college, writing the statute, guidelines and procedures, introducing the student service to the community of students and forming the offices by the end of 2014.

The presentation on the ICT service was given by Mr. Mladen Nikolić from School of Higher Chemical Technology from Kruševac. This presentation stressed the importance of integration of the members of the ACAS through a centralized IT service which will have a unified platform and services. This service would contribute to improvement of communication among the ACAS members. The mission of the service would be to foster innovation, research and new partnerships in this area. Bottom up approach must be applied to the ICT service. This means that a special attention should be given to infrastructure and network, privacy of data, application hosting and monitoring. In order to have a functional IT service, it is necessary to choose the right type of equipment which needs to be durable and have a long life cycle. Also, it is very important to create fire protection data centers and have very good backup solutions. Some of the strategic goals related to the network would be to install, upgrade and configurate network devices. The network also needs to be secured.

As far as servers are concerned, special attention should be given to their design, installation and maintenance. Care should be taken of storage configuration and maintenance as well as hardware and application monitoring. Each campus must run its own services for authentication, authorization, collaboration, local Lan, etc. Moreover, conditions should be made for VoIP communication, virtualization and videoconferencing. List of the needed equipment has been already composed. The next step is to make conditions for a physical server room. Several teams which would operate within the ICT service should be formed. There should be operations and technical support team, network and systems infrastructure team, solution development team, digital learning team and finally program management office, responsible for the financial management of the IT service. The action plan states that by the end of 2013 IT teams will be formed. In the following period applications and services need to be identified and developed, network should be set and equipment needs to be purchased and properly installed.

The presentation on the Quality assurance framework for the Academy was given by Mr. Đorđe Miltenović from College of Textile in Leskovac who elaborated on the mission, vision, strategic and operational goals of the service as well as its action plan. Vision of the QA service is to attract the brightest scholars from the country and the world and encourage international mobility for the purpose of improving education and sharing experiences among the students and faculty. Mission of the service is to create more efficient

services for the teaching staff and students, to provide student support and administrative services of the highest quality, celebrate the diversity of cultures, develop and intellectual atmosphere in which professional development is supported, valued and pursued by all stakeholders and implement innovative ways to improve the system of education. That is why some of the strategic goals are to improve the quality of the teaching process, study programmes, research work, textbooks, library and information resources, management administration of the Colleges, etc. First of all, it is necessary to develop unified standards and procedures, then, the next step is to carry out complete digitalization, and finally it is crucial to organize trainings for the personnel and build a positive and supportive working environment. The first goal is to develop and implement ACAS standards and procedures, but also to develop and adopt the ACAS statute. Then it is necessary to standardize all the documents, practices and procedures such as student questionnaires, teaching and non-teachnig staff questionnaires, etc. Next step is the digitalization of all ACAS plans and documents to enable paperless work. The third goal would be to ensure the academic, professional and personal success of all individuals within ACAS, which can be done by creating opportunities for the training of the personnel which will lead to broadening of their expertise and skills. The fourth goal is to create a positive and supporting working environment by providing cross-training opportunities for staff, provide team development, customer service training and provide a chart of responsibilities among various departments. This is suggested by elaborate activities of the action plan.

The first day of the meeting finished with the work in the work groups which presented the results of their discussions the following day.

The second day of the meeting started with the presentations of the work groups.
The IRO team added that their service should also enable exchange not only of teachers and students but also of knowledge, skills, competences and experiences. The service should contribute as well to the quality of the alumni base. Mission of the service needs to be simple and clear, which can be best defined as the parole, unite through cooperation''. In addition, the responsibility of the IR service would be to introduce and encourage soft skill courses as well. Operational goals would be to raise the awareness of the importance of international mobility, encourage staff and students to embrace international mobility, establish contacts with European institutions, sign bilateral agreements and make the IRO sustainable through constant dissemination of the results of international cooperation.

The work group which delt with Student services did not make any relevant changes in comparison to the model proposed during the first day of the meeting.
The ICT team suggested introducing an EDUROAM wifi network as well.
The Quality assurance team stated that the mission of their service should be to become recognizable in the country, region and beyond in terms of quality. Also, it is important that the standards are harmonized with the ones in the European Union if we want to be part of the common European area of education. Vision of the QA service should be to work on the constant improvement of the teaching staff, the quality of study programmes and the quality of the teaching process. In order to achieve these results the following obstacles must be overcome and solved: lack of the system for continual education of the teaching staff, lack of information on the requirements of the employers, lack of financial resources, lack of unified tools for assessment of the teaching process quality. Also, one of the very important operational goals is to provide sustainable financial resources for quality improvement which can be done through membership fees, sponsorship by the banks and employers and joint degree development.

The presentation on comparative analysis of accreditation standards was given by Mr. Dejan Blagojević from the School of Higher Technical Professional Education in Niš. This presentation focused on standards and structure of standards, organisation, procedures and commissions for accreditation and their role in

Serbia and the partner countries in the ECBAC project. As Bologna declaration emphasizes it, the accreditation is of crucial importance in the QA process. In Belgium, for instance, accreditation aims at guaranteeing national and international recognition of academic diplomas. Also, in Belgium as well as in Portugal and Germany stakeholders and their role in the process of accreditation is very important. Also, it should be noted that the starting point in the process of gaining of accreditation both in Belgium and Portugal is writing a self-evaluation report.

In 2006, the National Council in Serbia proposed rules and regulations on internal quality control, external quality control and the accreditation process itself of higher education institutions and their study programmes. There are 14 standards for accreditation which are applied in the system of higher education in Serbia. In partner countries like Belgium and Portugal the number of these standards is lower. Another interesting difference is that agencies for accreditation in Germany are independent bodies, which makes it possible for a German accreditation system to be organized in a decentralized manner.

At the time being, KMK standards are very important for Serbia since these standards are used for planning and conception of study programmes that are going to be accredited. These standards cover study structure and study length, admission requirements, classification of degrees, modularisation and ECTS.

Taking all of the above mentioned into account, the general conclusion of Mr. Blagojević is that there are many similarities in the accreditation process between Serbia and other EU countries since Serbia has made a lot of progress after the amendments to the Law on Higher education. Besides, standards are a changeable category which can be always further improved.

Afterwards, proposal for the purchase of the IT equipment was given. The suggestion is to obtain 8 servers, UPS and NATs, 32 computers, 8 digital printers and 8 Aps for EduRoam.

Director of The School for Education of Pre-School Teachers in Pirot, Mrs. Danijela Vidanović with the help of her colleague Mrs. Sanja Kovačević gave a short presentation on the HOLIPRI conference with international participants which took place in their school for the first time this October. The conference was decicated to holistic approach in education. It was a very succesful conference in which apart from many respectable professors, students also took part with their papers. This conference was attended by professors from Niš, Kruševac, Pirot, etc.. The guest speaker was Mr. Pero Spasojević from Bjeljina, Republic of Srpska who is an expert in holism. The conference was also a nice opportunity for the staff members of the college in Pirot to disseminate information on our ECBAC Tempus project.

After this presentation, Ms. Danica Milošević from the School of Higher Technical Professional Education from Niš gave a report on the English language courses organized at the colleges which are members of the ACAS. The report gave a realistic picture of the language courses which are hybernating since a big break has been made at almost each college due to the summer holiday period and the re-training period in September, October and November when some members of the college staff were absent from their institutions. Courses in the majority of schools are not intensive enough due to the fact that it is difficult to organize directors and members of the teaching and non-teaching staff to attend classes regularly baring in mind that they already have a lot of other obligations. The college in Vranje, for instance, did not even start a language course since their English language teacher was on a maternity leave. The conclusion is that more time is needed to finish the English language courses. The project coordinator, Mr. Geert De Lepeleer agreed that the English language course can be prolonged so that all the classes that were planned within the programme can be held out.

Partners from Belgium, Portugal and Germany gave their comments on the deliverables that is the written articles prepared by the ACAS members. They made a conclusion that the articles ask for proof-reading and correction of language mistakes.

At the end of the meeting, Mr. Andre Govaert shortly commented on the results of the previous meeting evaluation after which the meeting participants completed a new questionnaire for Prokuplje meeting.

At the end of the meeting in Prokuplje it was agreed that the next meeting should take place in January 29th-30th in Leskovac.

On behalf of the ECBAC TEMPUS project CONSORTIUM
Ms Danica Milošević