



**Regional Cluster Meeting on the
impact of Capacity Building in
Higher Education (CBHE)
projects in the Western Balkans
22-23 October 2019**



Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Western Balkans (WB) - a term coined 16 years ago at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki - signifies a unique geopolitical space that is preparing for the prospect of European integration in the years to come. Known for their cultural diversity and dynamism, WB countries are also home to a vibrant young population seeking to carve out a prosperous future for themselves. In this respect, the region is no stranger to struggle as it is faced with major societal and economic challenges such as youth unemployment and accompanying “brain drain”.

The European Commission champions the idea that education is a powerful tool to overcome those challenges as well as to boost the region’s attractiveness and competitiveness. Through the Erasmus+ Programme, the European Commission currently provides many opportunities for young people and academic staff of WB countries. The Programme constitutes one of the key means to improve capacities of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the region and to address education policies in higher education. **Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE)** projects aim to encourage cooperation between EU countries and partner countries and to support participant countries in addressing common challenges in relation to management and governance of HEIs.

In this context, the Education, Audiovisual, Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the National Erasmus+ Office (NEO) in Albania and the European Commission’s Directorate General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (DG EAC) held a two-day **Regional Cluster Meeting** in Durres (Albania) on 22-23 October 2019. The event gathered participants from WB HEIs, governmental authorities, NEOs, EU Delegation, DG EAC and EACEA who discussed **the state of play of the CBHE Programme in WB** as well as **the impact and sustainability of project results in the HE sector in the region.**



More specifically, the Regional Cluster Meeting was structured into **4 interactive workshops** covering different topics such as regional cooperation, HEI links with society and business, CBHE project impact on HE systems as well as the modernisation, accessibility, quality and internationalisation of the HEIs in the WB.

Erasmus+ CBHE in the Western Balkans at a glance

Statistically, Erasmus+ CBHE has seen a steady increase in the number of **applications** from the WB since 2015. Overall, **541 applications** were received and **88 CBHE projects** have been **funded** in the course of the **five Calls for Proposals**. All WB countries are involved in approximately the same number of projects, with a slightly higher involvement of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – with 38 selected projects each. Albania has 33 selected projects, Kosovo, 30, and Montenegro has 27.

A total of 73 Joint Projects and 15 Structural Projects were selected in the WB over the period 2015-2019. Among these 88, 37 are national projects, 39 regional and 12 cross-regional projects. In terms of **cooperation**, Germany, Italy, Austria and Croatia are the EU countries with whom WB countries cooperate most frequently.

Most WB activities focus on Joint Projects with an emphasis on **Curriculum Development**. This has always been a traditional activity for CBHE projects as it has allowed professors to work together in international consortia, to revise and update courses and programmes or to develop new ones. The vast majority of these courses and study programmes have gained recognition from their HEIs and/or the relevant authorities in the country. This high level of recognition is a testament to the high quality of these programmes.

Curriculum development in the **Environmental sector** is particularly popular and matches the policy priority of this field for the EU. Recurrent discipline areas include agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary science, natural environments and wildlife, and environmental sciences. But CBHE projects in the WB region are not limited to these sectors and tackle many other disciplines such as **education, engineering or health**.

Workshop 1 – “Strengthening the links with society and business to improve student and staff competencies and skills and thereby enhance graduate employability”



Workshop 1 tackled one of the key elements in the Programme – namely “strengthening links with society and business to improve student and staff competencies and skills and thereby enhance graduate employability”. Participants analysed the role and importance of society and business in education and discussed different ways to bridge the gap between HEIs and the business sector.

Participants discussed how **the involvement of suitable actors from society and the business sector has the potential to improve student skills and enhance their employability**. In so doing, they cited a wide range of examples from CBHE projects such as governmental agencies and services, non-profit associations, the media and business companies, among others.

diMTV

To address the lack of Multimedia and Digital TV professionals in Kosovo and Albania, the diMTV project collaborated with **local radio stations** (UP-TEMA, UBT-Radio Ferizaj, UBT-Radio Vizioni, UBT-Radio Fontana) and **Albania’s Public Broadcaster**.
<http://dimtv-project.al/>

TEACHER

Through the introduction of competence-based curricula and the modernisation of teaching equipment and methodology, this project improved the quality of teacher education and training according to **labour market needs.**

<http://teacher.unt.ba/>

Participants also examined the challenges that come with the interplay between universities and businesses. Some cited a lack of “mutual trust” and the existence of “different priorities” as the root causes for this complex relation while others went as far as saying that each sector speaks a “completely different language”. Overall, participants agreed that this challenging relation has been fuelled by misassumptions as HEIs fear that the influence of the business sector will have a negative impact on the quality of their teaching while companies believe that HEIs lack a practical approach.

Whether the reason for this gap is a lack of understanding between HEIs and businesses or a matter of different priorities, what is clear is that **CBHE projects are addressing all of these challenges in different ways.** Participants outlined a wide range of good practices from CBHE projects that can be classified into five categories:

- 1) the creation of business support offices within universities;
- 2) the involvement of business representatives in the design phase of CBHE projects;
- 3) the involvement of business and industrial lecturers in the teaching process;
- 4) internship programmes; and
- 5) the connection between business and students, graduates and researchers through platforms, databases and online services.

Further examples include incubators, collaborative centres, nests, clinics, markets, fora, units of knowledge transfer, regular workshops, lectures from industry, meetings and conferences presenting student innovations.

ELEMEND

The ELEMEND project designed an **internship programme** at each WB HEI **in cooperation with industry representatives** to increase employability and address labour market needs.
www.elemend.ba

Finally, and importantly, participants discussed the issues of employability and mobility. There was consensus that employability is a complex challenge in today's labour market as it is driven by the dynamics of globalisation. In turn, this has had far-reaching implications on the way we understand the concept of mobility as well.

When discussing how to trace the complexities of employability, **participants highlighted good practice from CBHE projects** such as platforms, databases, online services or alumni networks.

GRADUA

The GRADUA project put in place an **online platform** for graduate tracking and employability:

*<http://gradua.almalaurea.it/> ;
<https://www.graduaproject.com/gradua-project/>*

SMARTAL

This project established an **alumni association** in the framework of the SmartAI master.

www.smartal.uet.edu.al

Workshop 2 – “CBHE projects supporting modernisation, quality, accessibility and internationalisation of HEIs in the WB”



ART-REM

This **curriculum development** project has assisted reproductive technologies and regenerative medicine in Serbia. With new laboratory equipment, courses and the involvement of small enterprises, it has helped **increase the quality of education.**

www.artrem.pmf.uns.ac.rs

Workshop 2 revolved around **the role of CBHE projects in supporting the modernisation, quality, accessibility and internationalisation of HEIs in the WB.** In this context, participants highlighted the importance of CBHE projects in the **modernisation of curricula and the harmonisation with European standards.** Some participants also pointed out that CBHE projects had introduced and/or developed new teaching methods, new courses and new learning approaches such as problem-based learning.

SWARM

This project **strengthened the master curricula** in water resources management for **WB HEIs** in line with the Bologna requirements. Furthermore, it designed and implemented seven up-to-date **laboratories** in WB partner HEIs. .

www.swarm.ni.ac.rs

Participants also stressed **the importance of equipment** in CBHE projects and **a key asset in project implementation**. Not only has equipment helped improve and modernise the communication between project partners but it has also increased the quality of the learning process. For instance, the use of new laboratories has enabled students to acquire a more practical approach, thus preparing them for the labour market.

BENEFIT

In order to boost the Telecommunications Engineering Profile to meet societal and industrial needs, this project adopted **modern teaching methodologies and tools, an upgraded infrastructure** and created **joint HEI industry laboratories**.

www.project-benefit.eu

The majority of CBHE projects in the Western Balkans focus on **practical work and the development of practical skills**. CBHE projects have successfully established: laboratories for students; platforms; training courses; as well as **Life Long Learning Centres** to provide continuous professional development.

All4R&D

This project accelerated research, innovation, knowledge and technology transfer through strategic academia-industry alliances. This mutual collaboration succeeded by putting in place a **platform** focusing on knowledge transfer, innovation and networking potential

www.all4rd.net

The **internationalisation of HEIs is one of the main objectives of CBHE projects in the WB**. That explains why many of these projects aim to **improve the mobility of staff and students** as well as to reach more agreements between HEIs. In order to facilitate the cooperation and mobility between institutions, participants deemed it important to **introduce English language teaching and education**

SENVIBE

This project created and implemented two types of **Life-Long Learning (LLL) courses for practitioners** in the fields of Noise & Vibration Engineering, Environmental Protection and Occupational Safety
www.senvibe.uns.ac.rs

STINT

The main objective of this project was to improve **the internationalisation process in Bosnian HEIs** by developing institutional internationalisation strategies and indicators and a common B&H recognition model.
www.stint-project.net

In the last part of the workshop, participants identified and discussed the main **legal and policy-related** obstacles in project implementation (i.e. accreditation, tender procedures, administrative burdens and paperwork).

Overall, **participants concluded that national authorities should solve these obstacles** at the corresponding authority level so that they pose no significant problems for HEIs. In particular, they suggested the creation of a Regional Agency for Accreditation. Participants also called for the need to **discuss potential implementation obstacles with target groups** prior to the inception of a project. There was also consensus on the fact that developing more projects on the improvement of Law could help solve previous problems and prevent potential obstacles.

Workshop 3 - CBHE projects producing an impact on higher education systems and promoting reforms at national and/or regional level in the WB.



There was consensus on **the positive impact of CBHE projects on higher education systems** and the promotion of reforms at national and/or regional level in the WB. Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that measuring that impact is a difficult task.

DUALEDU

This project seeks to create the legal conditions for the implementation of Dual Education in Serbia. To do so, it proposes **amendments to laws on Dual Education, Higher Education, and Labour** as well as Accreditation Standards and their subsequent **adoption**.

www.dualedu.ef.uns.ac.rs

CBHE project participants are not members of decision-making instances and therefore they cannot develop new policies or contribute to national or regional policies and regulations directly. Nevertheless, **CBHE projects have contributed to HE policies and regulations indirectly** through the accreditation of HEI programs (BSc, MSc, PhD), **cooperation with Ministries** in the field of Long Life Learning (LLL) or Vocational Training (VT) and **cooperation with the non-HEI sector** (mainly NGOs, independent agencies and the private sector).

When it comes to the creation of new bodies or regulatory frameworks, **CBHE projects have also contributed to the creation of useful agencies and bodies** both at an institutional and civic level. Examples include QA units, Centres for Innovation and Entrepreneurship support, Centres for Mobility and Internationalisation, Career Centres, Alumni Centres and Advisory Centres in different fields.

TEAVET

In order to develop teacher competencies for a comprehensive VET system in Albania, this project created eight Life Long Learning centres in each partner HEI and a **network** of each centre supported by the **Ministry and the rectors**.

www.teavet.org

Despite their modest influence on governmental policies, **the socio-economic impact of CBHE projects in the Western Balkans** has been considerable. Not only have CBHE projects instilled a European spirit in the education of younger generations but they have also fostered awareness on the importance of mobility, networking, and social responsibility, as well as the respect for minorities and disadvantaged groups. Participants illustrated this with key examples in the fields of education, science, tourism, energy, business, environment, social work and political culture.

On the other hand, the workshop underlined the role of **academic, research and social innovation as key elements in the impact of CBHE projects**. Participants gave a wide range of examples such as the creation of **modules** (LLL, VT and non-formal education modules), **mobility, internships**, the design of **IT platforms** for different purposes (such as employability, academic career) or for specific target groups (disabled students). They also highlighted the development of **new tools** with specific objectives (such as teaching, supporting the dissemination of project objectives in the region and beyond, measuring academic competence and supporting graduates in their job searches in Europe

When discussing **policy/strategy support**, the general opinion was that CBHE projects had actually received **excellent professional support** rather than “strategic support” as such. Participants cited positive examples from the government of Vojvodina, praised the role of project coordinators and team members and acknowledged the good work of NEOs in all WB countries. They also pointed out that many HEIs (especially private ones) strongly support the Erasmus+ Programme, considering it as a great opportunity for professional and academic growth.

The sustainability of project results was regarded as the weakest point in the Programme as it is inevitably affected by all the aforementioned obstacles. Sustainability is often viewed in general terms as “side” or “added value” effects such as “internationalisation”, “networking” or “further projects”. Conversely, in the case of private HEIs, the sustainability of project results appears to be more concrete as these private HEIs have managed to attract students with their new study programmes. According to participants, sustainability necessarily calls for “time”, and “support” from a wider community, and its success is closely related to a realistic business plan.

The legacy of the Tempus Programme and the support of the Erasmus+ Programme in the WB is invaluable, and it will take years or even decades to measure the strong impact properly. The Programmes have instilled the “European spirit” in the region as well as the importance of mobility and networking. The benefits of the Programmes in the region can also be seen at an institutional level considering that it has enabled WB HEI to purchase a significant amount of equipment.

Finally, and importantly, participants agreed that there is a high level of synergy between projects (building on previous initiatives) which facilitates cooperation and eases the working methodology.

Workshop 4 – CBHE fostering regional cooperation in WB and convergence with EU developments in Higher Education.



CBHE projects are considered as a **great opportunity for beneficiary partner institutions to network with other HEIs in the region** even if there is room for improvement in several areas.

In the WB context, regional cooperation has been traditionally perceived as less attractive than cooperation with EU HEIs. Participants suggested to work towards the creation of a WB Higher Education Area, which would facilitate, among other things, mobility of staff and students, or the development of joint degrees. WB HEIs have also signed a large number of intra-institutional/bilateral agreements but not of all them are active or have promoted regional cooperation in the field of education and research. According to participants, further efforts should be made concerning project sustainability in order to foster and sustain regional cooperation.

Participants pointed out that the implementation of regional initiatives presents significant challenges that render national CBHE projects more attractive. Joint degree projects constitute a case in point since there is no automatic degree recognition practice in the WB.

There was consensus that implemented **CBHE projects are in line with EU policy objectives** and many of them **actively contribute to EU Cooperation and Development policies**. There is also a significant number of CBHE projects in the WB that drew their inspiration from the transparency and convergence tools developed in the context of the Bologna Process. Nevertheless, participants concluded that new areas and sectors need to be explored in future CBHE projects.

REBUS

This project contributed to the **European Qualification Framework** by establishing concrete sets of reference systems for key competences that can be transferred across other European Member States and bridge academia and business. REBUS will further enrich **European certification systems (e.g. EUROPASS)**, since it will evidence social and personal skills and competences.

<https://www.rebusproject.net/>

euroPS

The euroPS project has created and accredited a Joint Master Programme in Political Science that is implemented by WB and EU HEIs

<https://www.euro-ps.org/>

E-VIVA

This project is a **follow-up of REBUS**. It addresses the issue of student skills development, facilitation and validation of their skills in informal learning contexts. In particular, E-VIVA aims at substantiating the most fundamental competences for service economy and will contribute to higher transparency of these competences, for students, teachers and employers..

<https://evivaproject.eu/>

Concluding remarks

The Cluster meeting on the impact of the CBHE action in the WB region brought together a large number of stakeholders, and the organisation in the form of workshops was an appropriate and successful approach to address important action priorities and policy aspects. The participants were highly satisfied with the outcomes of the event and encouraged the Executive Agency to organise more events of this kind. In particular, the Cluster Meeting provided the participants with the opportunity to discuss the impact of CBHE projects in terms of regional cooperation, modernisation, accessibility and internationalisation of Higher Education. It encouraged and facilitated the exchange of good practice and networking and served as a platform to identify obstacles in the implementation of CBHE projects and practical solutions. As a result of the event, CBHE projects in the Western Balkan region enjoy wider visibility and their quality, impact and sustainability is enhanced. The conclusions of the Cluster Meeting can serve National Authorities, the European Commission and HEI institutions and promote re-examination of the actual needs of the HE sector in the Western Balkans and the way these needs can be better addressed.



