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Doctoral studies, as one of the most prominent problems in the Montenegrin and Albanian higher education systems, will be addressed through the project "Reforming doctoral studies in Montenegro and Albania - good practice paradigm (MARDS)". The project belongs to ERASMUS + KA2 scheme - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices - Higher Education Capacity Building. MARDS worth EUR 873,120.00 and has been planned to be implemented by the University of Montenegro (UoM) in cooperation with 15 partners from Montenegro, Albania and the European Union.

In this article I will talk about the project goals, the situation of doctoral studies in Montenegro, based on initial research carried out within the project, the space for improvement through the MARDS as well as about establishment of two joint doctoral schools in Montenegro and Albania that will serve as pilot programmes. I hope that some of my colleagues will carry out a similar analysis for Albania to ensure the full description of the situation in the countries under the current project.

The main objectives of the MARDS

There are two general goals of the MARDS project. The first is to improve national policies in the field of doctoral education in Montenegro and Albania, by proposing measures that policy makers and stakeholders need to adopt if they are willing to improve the current situation. The second goal is to start-up two joint doctoral schools; one in Albania, in the field of sustainable development and tourism, and the second one in Montenegro, in the field of sustainable natural sciences and technologies, both as examples of good practice in the Region.

From this perspective the catchword "example of good practice" has been introduced to the title sentence "reform of doctoral studies". The success of the programme in terms of fulfilling our goals does not mainly depend on us. We have the vision and a plan and support of the University of Montenegro management, which coordinate the entire project.

In addition to these two main goals there are several sub-objectives: to improve the human and infrastructural capacities by training the teaching and administrative staff with our European partners and to equip partner universities with facilities that will provide on-spot and remote education during the lifetime of the project and upon its completion. A number of other benefits are also available as student mobility,
connection with industry, networking for future projects and initiatives, etc.

From my own experience, indirect values sometimes bring more benefits.

**The survey about “state of the art of Doctoral Education in Montenegro and Albania” - some findings**

In the course of the study maintained within the scope of the project, we examined the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and risks of doctoral education in Albania and Montenegro.

As for Montenegro, the strengths are the 45 years of tradition in doctoral education, existence of vision and strategy, relatively good academic staff, especially in natural and technical sciences, regulations related to study programmes within doctoral education, defined curricula, small easily collaborative research community, sufficient experience in introducing European practices and intensive international collaboration, strict criteria for mentors, integrated university that provides multidisciplinary work, investment in infrastructure as well as young and motivated students. Last years there is a trial to assist doctoral education is maintained by Ministry of Science.

However, the scarcity of doctoral students because of high tuition fees, neglecting state-based regulations in doctoral education, lack of motivated supervisors, especially in humanities and social sciences, workflow mismatch between colleagues and universities, dissonant system of documents flow on college-university level, irrelevance of doctoral degree outside the university, inadequate infrastructure (labs, libraries), inaccessibility to research and scientific databases, inbreeding (reproduction within institution), limited involvement of experts from foreign institutions or industry, insufficient funding, especially by non-academic sector and others are only some of the, overloading doctoral students with teaching activities in their home institutions, limited research mobility and internationalisation, no clustering in research groups etc., are only some of the problems that doctoral education faces in Montenegro.

**The space for improvement**

As well it is a challenge to improve the situation. The process of capacity building in doctoral education should be carefully planned, taking in account the “bottom-up principle”. On the other hand, it has to go “step by step” as it is impossible to solve all problems at once. Some of the initial steps for improving the situation are: campaign for promoting doctoral education at national level that means raising awareness of stakeholder and target groups about the necessity of doctoral education in one society; intensive cooperation with foreign institutions; shift from the pure classical training mode to research-based studying; promoting PhD mobility and cooperated research; inviting foreign professors and scientific diaspora to participate in doctoral education; using EU funds as much as possible; motivating the local economy to invest in doctoral education etc....

Normally there are many risks as well. First of all, there is an unacceptably small number of students interested in doctoral education in Montenegro. More and more graduates are pursuing to perform the doctoral education abroad, which is natural for small country. There are plenty of universities in the Region that deliver PhDs of dubious quality, and the Ministry recognises the titles by default. There is a limited number of projects that may foster the recruitment of doctoral students in the country, etc.

Of course, there is a number of other advantages and disadvantages that are more or less noticeable.

**Development and funding as main challenges**

The complete insight into the state of doctoral studies in any country can be obtained by considering aspects such as legal framework, strategy and vision, statistics, research capacity, structure of doctoral programs, mentoring, selection
of candidates support of business sector, internationalization etc.

Our research went in two directions: examining “states of the art” in the system of doctoral education and in the system of funding doctoral studies. The first one was performed by renowned experts in the field of doctoral education, Dr. Lucas Zinner from the University of Vienna and Prof. Dr Melita Kovacević from the University of Zagreb. They are partners in our project responsible for transfer of “know how” from developing world to our transition situation. Two remaining EU universities, the University of Maribor and the University of Banská Bystrica contributed to the quality control and mobility exchange process within the project. The tool was methodologically designed by Dr Zinner and Dr Kovacevic with the support of team members from University of Montenegro, in the form of questionnaires. The second research track related to the founding was led by Dr Natasa Kostic, Vice-Rector for International Cooperation, from the University of Montenegro and Dr Predrag Miranovic, President of the Centre for Doctoral Studies in close cooperation with responsible ministries in Montenegro and Albania, Ministry of Education of Montenegro, Ministry of Science in Montenegro as well as the Albanian Ministry of Education for Youth and Sport. All institutions involved in the project responded to targeted surveys, which is then statistically analysed using SWOT approach.

The conclusion is that neither of the two Montenegrin universities is satisfied with the current PhD funding model. Doctoral candidates are obliged by the Higher Education Act to pay a fairly high tuition fee which is not affordable for students under existing social and economic conditions in the country. As the consequence of the situation the small amount of students is enrolled in the doctoral programmes. Usually, most of them are associates (teaching assistants) at the faculty units. The budget of academic institutions allocated to the doctoral studies is limited, and the financial flows are not coming from the state budget either. There is no interest from the agencies, business organizations or any other type of public or private institutions to support financially the doctoral studies in the country.

The good momentum is the effort of the Ministry of Science of Montenegro, which for the second year is announcing a competition for doctoral scholarships in Montenegro. The interest to this scholarship has surprisingly exceeded all our expectations.

The self-financing system is not satisfactory because students are under the pressure to earn for their own living rather than get focused on doctoral studies. Serious doctoral studies require time and constant commitment. Running around between work and research commitments leaves no or little space to get concentrated on doctoral studies and undertake a quality doctoral research.

The trainings of the supervisors and professionals

The MARDS project is not limited to providing the “state of the art” in policies of development and founding doctoral studies and implementations of pilot PhD curricula between two countries. The training of the supervisors, administrative staff and others involved in doctoral education is an additional aim of the project. We had or will have a series of the training/seminars. The training related to the management (professional personal) in doctoral studies was organised at the University of Vienna. In Dubrovnik (branch of the University of Zagreb) the training will relate to the Professionalization of PhD Supervision (for experienced and less experienced) PhD supervisors. The topic of the training at University of Banská Bistrica is The methodologies and procedures for joint PhD programmes establishments. The University of Maribor will organise training about Quality of doctoral education, institutional policies and strategies. We consider these training topics crucial
components that affect doctoral education. In particular, we have more problems in Montenegro regarding rather competent administration and meaningful research than dealing with mentors. However, we hopefully will at least be familiar with good practice examples after the training.

Harmonisation with EU standards and Salzburg principles

There are a lot of talks about Salzburg principles. The name by itself says that these are principles, and in my opinion, one should not fall into the trap of Bologna and turn the principles into policies and, let me say, that happens very often, and manipulate with these principles for gaining dividends in daily politics. The Salzburg Principles were adopted in 2005 with the idea of providing a roadmap for the development of the third cycle of higher education in Europe. They can be reflected in: 1. Research Excellence, 2. Attractive Institutional Environment, 3. Interdisciplinary Research Options, 4. Exposure to industry and other relevant employment sectors, 5. International networking, 6. Transferable skills training and 7. Quality Assurance.

It is up to national stakeholders to implement these principles either completely or partially. Undoubtedly, only by implementing all the principles can we achieve critical mass in doctoral education.

Instead of conclusion

The competition for quality PhD education is daily growing in the entire world. Any research university that wants to take a leadership role in higher education should pay a serious attention to doctoral studies. In transition countries like the Western Balkan states, doctoral studies are mainly used to train university teachers. Fundamentally, As such, the process is not beneficial to the public at all. Young people need to understand that investing in doctoral education is a matter of their professional growth, even if they want to be engaged in the economy or start their own business. The state needs to set up criteria for certain jobs that require PhD qualifications. Moreover, the knowledge-based economy should not be just a nice term; it should be an opportunity to practice skills and competences obtained through the doctoral research. The doctoral education must meet the requirement of attaining critical mass, which can be achieved through increasing the internationalization or enhancing the number of joint cross-border programs. This is not about mass education; it is about imparting knowledge to more people to help them to effectively function in the society. MARDS is a pilot project to show how cross-border PhD programmes between two countries can be beneficial and can jointly produce a sustainable solution to many problems.

Prof. dr Radovan Stojanović is coordinator of MARDS project, member of Montenegrin HERE team and member of Doctoral Board of University of Montenegro. He is almost for two decades active in reforming higher education system in line with EU policies. He coordinated or sub-coordinated 6 TEMPUS/ERASMUS+, 2 NATO, 1 FP6, 1 FP7, 1 WUS, 1 World Bank and 1 H2020 projects as well as 4 Bilateral and 5 National projects. He is nominated as an expert in EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency) from 2005, EURAMET (European Association of Metrology Institutes) and Funds for Innovations of Slovakia and Macedonia. His publication score counts more than 300 publications and 1000 citations.

More about Radovan Stojanovic:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radovan_Stojanovi%C4%87

http://www.apeg.ac.me/rstojanovic.htm