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**REFORMING THE STUDY PROGRAMS AND CURRICULA
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTENEGRO
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROVISIONS
OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION**

A Case Study (January 2003)

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I. Introduction: Trends and challenges facing the higher education system in Montenegro

There is only one university in Montenegro – University of Montenegro. It is a public institution made up of faculties (providing 4-6 year courses), colleges (two year courses), academies of art (four year courses) and scientific institutes. There are no private higher education institutions.

University of Montenegro is the only university in Montenegro, a country in South-Easter Europe that has the population of 700 000. This is a state university as it is fully-funded by the state budget.

The University of Montenegro was founded in 1974 and it has evolved into an umbrella for its following units:

- 12 faculties (Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Metallurgy and Technology, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Architecture, Faculty of Geodesy, Faculty of Medicine – all in Podgorica, Faculty of Marine Studies and Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management – both in Kotor and Faculty of Philosophy* – Niksic),
- 3 academies (Academy of Fine Arts, Academy of Drama and Music Academy – all located in Cetinje),
- 4 institutes (Institute for Biotechnology, Institute for History and Institute for Foreign Languages – from Podgorica and Institute for Marine Biology – from Kotor),
- 3 colleges (Physiotherapy College - Herceg Novi, Business College and IT College – in Podgorica),
- 1 University Library – Podgorica, and
- Rectorate in Podgorica

** Faculty of Philosophy has evolved from teacher training college into an umbrella for the Faculty of English Language, Faculty of Italian Language, Faculty of Russian Language, Faculty of Language and Literature, Faculty of Pedagogy, Faculty of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Physical Education and the Department of German Studies and Department of French Studies.*

The development of the University of Montenegro has been very much similar to that haphazard evolvement of the Faculty of Philosophy. These historical facts are actually to blame for the fact that the University does not have one campus but it is rather dislocated into five towns.

Local politicians are still going out of their ways trying to have new faculties situated in their towns. As the new law on higher education has not been passed yet, and new faculties are being opened within the existing ones, they might stand a good chance to get their “own faculty”.

1. Figures

Today, the University of Montenegro has about 10 500 students, teaching staff of 900 and administrative staff of 600. The number of students is rather a relative figure because of the excessive average duration of studies stretching up to seven and eight years for what should be four for social and engineering studies, and six for Medicine.

Due to the fact that there are no courses in English, there has not been a single international student at this University for the last decade. There are 500 students from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina studying at University of Montenegro. However, there are many students from Montenegro who study outside Montenegro and some statistics say that this number goes as high as 5400. Regardless of the fact whether this figure is true or not, competition from the region is rather threatening to affect the position of the University of Montenegro even at home.

There are already obvious trends of declining number of students at the University in the last few years. As countries in the region i.e. former Yugoslav republics, have been doing better and faster with reform, leaders at the University of Montenegro have to give better consideration to this brain-drain that lies in store. Montenegrin youth will be better attracted with prospects of shorter, internationalized, applied studies and the prospects of being qualified to work in European labor market.

2. Management bodies

In total the University of Montenegro comprises 24 units, each of these being independent legal entity that are only coordinated by uniform management policy initiated and conducted by the function of the rector and four vice-rectors (including a student vice-rector) as executive body and Senate and Council for Curricula and Research Policy, as policy-making bodies.

The Senate comprises 39 members elected from the representatives of all faculties, representatives of the founder – the Government of Montenegro (9) and representatives of students (7 members). In the Senate, the rector and vice-rectors take part in sessions, whereas they do not have voting rights. The Senate is the highest policy-making authority.

The Council for Curricula and Research Policy comprises the rector, four vice-rectors and representatives of all University units, each being also represented from each of their departments, if any. This is the highest authority for conducting curricular and research policy.

Management is rather fragmented and both the Council and Senate act as disenchanting queens as they do not have much say over management at faculties. Anyway, faculties have status of legal entity and some of them have evolved into self-sufficient structures, generic in their own right. The only function the

University management have is to transfer the funds from the budget into the faculties' respective accounts.

Many faculties have successfully sold their services in the market (tuition fees, specialist courses, project design, expertise, attractive post-graduate courses etc.) and have become less reliant on the joint budget, but taking the funds anyway, without demonstrating solidarity with other "less lucrative" faculties.

Montenegro has 'served' ten years of UN sanctions which left their trace on every single aspect of university operation. However, research and library supply activities were most badly affected. Research has somehow managed to recuperate, but libraries remained intact. Apart from French and German government's respective donations for language courses, WUS-Austria donation of human rights reference publications and Norwegian government's donation of gender studies books, books and periodicals have not been supplied for a long time.

Big, cumbersome and poorly managed university cannot hope to solve the library supply problem on its own. Costly, overstaffed and inefficient university cannot afford to allocate any money on library supply or purchase of connection to search-banks. Thus, it has to turn to donors and University of Montenegro has managed to get subscription to EBSCO on-line library with help from the Open Society Fund (2001) and donation of 6 000 reference books from SABRE foundation – USA (2002).

Being aware of how libraries are vital to university operation, University of Montenegro has to get streamlined and more cost-effective structure in order to even hope to solve this crucial problem. Without solving this the University cannot hope to eliminate the outdated and conservative, authoritarian concept of higher education and replace it with streamlined, modern concept of self-responsibility and self-reliance and individualization of academic work.

II. State of curricula in view of the provisions of the Bologna Declaration

This section will deal more with an overview of ongoing processes towards the reforms of Higher education in Montenegro in light of the Bologna process. The reason for being purposefully "unaware" of prescribed structure is that there have been rather modest achievements in Montenegro in this regard, in curricular reform, if any.

Thus, curricular reform part of this chapter will be underdeveloped in comparison to the envisaged developments part. This is rightly so as the envisaged developments have actually become more visible and developed. Significant curricular reforms, which should not stay at the level of reforms but become a curricular overhaul, will evolve along the way of legal and structural reforms. The vision (how to do that and by which time) in this regards has remained less clear.

Being very specific about curricular and study program reforms in Montenegro seems as a mission impossible for the time being.

The reform process in Montenegro had begun in 1998, a year before Bologna Declaration was signed. In the light of this Declaration, the new reform philosophy and concept of joint European higher education space has started making its way to Montenegro. It, fortunately, frustrated earlier attempts (three of them) to redraft old legislation and make another conservative concept, oblivious to the developments outside.

There has been no clear vision of where to go, what timeframe the reform need to comply with, nor how to achieve that. There were few sole initiatives to define a mission or vision statement of the reforms but, due to the largeness of managerial bodies, these attempts have failed. What the development so far has shown is that the reform is actually not moving ahead because of the lack of compass.

There were a few people who have represented university at conferences and seminars discussing the reforming process under the umbrella of Bologna declaration and few people around them whose minds were open to accept the new ideas and challenges. These leaders were actually seen as the 'lone riders' i.e. sole proponents of the new concept, and not as the messengers or ushers into the complex joint European higher education space. Thus the resistance to change is still rather strong.

The reform concept adopted by the University's leadership placed emphasis solely on legislative reform. As the process has not come anything near to the end yet, new legislation is still expected to provide a blue-print for other developments towards reforms according to the model outlined in Bologna declaration. Thus it was decided that the first stage of higher education reform should be to draft new legislation. Too many hopes have been placed within this first stage.

The state, the founder of the University of Montenegro, has decided to stay out for the purpose of leaving academia to reshape and to recompose themselves. Such freedom has proved to be a heavy burden for the University staff though. The state is losing patience as other integration processes, for example joining Council of Europe, cannot start without educational reform, and particularly higher education reform, is completed.

One good move toward something that was thought to be a good start was the analysis of the latest draft law on higher education made by the experts working for the Council of Europe^{*}. However, they had found that the concept offered in that draft was traditional and conservative and, being such, it could not respond to external and internal challenges implied in the Bologna process which has become by this time became a buzz word for everyone at University, but fully understood by only a few people at the University.

* Prof. Jurgen Kohler (Germany) and Denis Farrington (UK)

Nevertheless the comments, recommendations and remarks given by international experts who have analyzed the pre-Bologna concepts have been instrumental in creating crucial document, actually a policy document, titled New Legal Framework for Higher Education in Montenegro (adopted by the Senate in December 2002). It should be considered as a 'missing' mission statement. What makes it incomplete, though, is that no timeframes were not envisaged in the document although the time is ticking away fast towards 2010, set in Bologna Declaration for completion of the reform processes in higher education in Europe. Yet, there are a lot of things to be done in Montenegro by that time.

The curricular reform has been sidelined due to the fact that drafting of new legislation was given precedence. Another thing was the that each faculty has worked on curricula on its own.

The Law on University and the Statute prescribe that general subject curricula are developed by the University, while the curricula of professional and optional subjects are developed by faculties with prior approval given by the University. The newly developed curricula must be compared with the curricula of at least three universities from the country or elsewhere in the world.

Curricular development has been driven by the need to attract new enrollments as the student-drain has strongly affected the figures and complacency with the existing state of affairs. Unlike universities in developed countries, curricular reform at the University of Montenegro was not motivated by Bologna process.

The Faculty of Civil Engineering has completed curricular reform in such manner that length of study has been reduced from ten semesters to eight, introduced one semester modules and introduced two new courses, one of architecture and one of geodesy which started in this academic year (2002/2003). The changes were approved by the Senate, the Council and the founder – the state.

This year the Faculty of Marine Studies has adopted new curricula but remained with eight semester long undergraduate study concept. This faculty transformed the course in marine communications and automatics into the Course on Marine Electrical Engineering, that was deemed more appropriate to the needs of this branch of economy in Montenegro.

Faculty of Mechanical Engineering has reformed its curricula and introduced one semester modules but remained with the same concept of eight semesters for undergraduate studies.

The Faculty of Philosophy has completed procedure of introducing two new courses of six semesters. These are BA Course in French Language and Literature and the BA Course in German Language and Literature. Other language courses remained with four year long undergraduate studies. Other courses in this faculty are about to be changed in terms of introduction of new, one semester long modules and changed curricula.

Faculty of Electrical Engineering has updated and modernized its curricula, introduced new ones attractive for students and more abreast with demands of the labor market, but remained with eight semester long undergraduate course.

Faculty of Metallurgy and Technology updated its curricula, introduced new Course of Chemical Technology and remained with the concept of eight semester long undergraduate studies.

Finally, the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics has completely changed its Course in Mathematics and Computer Sciences and, not a surprise for University of Montenegro, remained with traditional concept of four year long undergraduate studies.

What we can conclude from the developments regarding curricular reform is that only newly established undergraduate courses are following the pattern of Bologna proclaimed BA concept of three year duration. The opinion of leadership who are strongly supportive of Bologna process concept is that these courses are going to pave the way for the others to follow. The students of these courses and the state are going to see how more efficient the new concept is and more appropriate to the societal and more general needs.

Another thing that we can conclude from this is rather unbelievable for the reasoning, but very much true for conservative university context, and that is being: it is easier to introduce changes when you start from the scratch than when you have something to built upon. However, that is how the experience has shown at this University.

1. Envisaged developments

The future developments are coming into shape since the Senate adopted the document titled New Legal Framework for higher education in Montenegro in December 2002. This document can be interpreted as a kind of a mission statement or vision of what will be done in order to reform higher education in Montenegro.

In other countries it would be done by the government on the proposal given by the ministry of education, or possibly by the Parliament. In Montenegro, the situation is quite unorthodox since the Government of Montenegro has decided to entrust this task to the University of Montenegro, the only provider of higher education in Montenegro, fully respecting its autonomy to decide how to best serve the societal needs. It proved to be rather a heavy burden to handle having in mind how fragmented and umbrella-like the structure of university is.

Nevertheless, after numerous consultations made with experts from other countries, recommendations and expertise received and having analyzed references and literature available on the topic of Bologna process so far, the University of Montenegro has articulated its vision of reforms. The law that defines higher education now is titled the Law on University has been called in jargon an 'old law' and the most general premise is that the 'new law' should better be titled Law on Higher Education or Higher Education Act.

The change of the title will not mean only cosmetics but it will imply a very important change in relation to the 'old law'. The idea underpinning this is a more evident fact that in future some other institutions of higher education might be founded.

Even presently, in the eve of big restructuring of the University, some ideas have been articulated that three academies (music, drama, arts) might decide to set up a separate university of arts. Further, there have been some views that engineering faculties could set up their own university. In addition, some universities from abroad might opt for franchising their courses and do that in Montenegro, having in mind its position in the region, attractive environment, lack of language barriers with ex-Yugoslav republics etc. Thus, the new law will outline the framework that will accommodate these possibilities, and this was the least disputed reformist premise.

Consequently, the new law will prescribe something that the 'old law' has not and that is the accreditation of institutions and courses. So far this topic has not been too relevant for Montenegrin system of higher education. The new studies and courses had to be approved by all relevant bodies at the University and eventually adopted by the founder, which is the state. How could have the accreditation of courses be done in different way once you have only one university? So, for example, professor teaching a course in medieval history is the only one teaching this subject in Montenegro and s/he would have to give opinion of the validity of his own teaching subject.

Thus, many experts advised university leadership that Montenegro and other small countries in the region that do not have linguistic barriers among them set up a joint accreditation office that would cater for accreditation needs of all higher education institutions in these countries. Thereby, apart from creating a more impartial and independent evaluation and accreditation procedure, this body would serve as both internal and external accreditation body, which might bring an added value into this important process.

This idea might produce even bigger effects as the curricula and courses will be satisfying the criteria set by such a joint accreditation body and the recognition process will be less painful, more structured and objective, which is required by Lisbon Declaration. Eventually, the mobility might increase at the earliest stage among those countries. This is particularly important for Montenegro since it has a large number of students studying at universities in former Yugoslav states.

On the basis of experience and requirements presented in the discussions conducted at the university and in relation to university, the following principles have been identified as cornerstones of the reform of higher education in Montenegro. The general conclusion stated in the document "New Legal Framework for Higher Education in Montenegro" is that any deferral or non-observance of the principles set forth will make reform process incomplete, invalid and put it below proclaimed European standards.

The following will be guiding and binding principles of higher education reform in Montenegro:

- **The scope of the new legislation** – New law should not specify in detail all aspects of higher education system. The new law should formulate only principal commitments and the basic structure of the higher education system, rights of individuals and responsibility of the state. Other elements will be further developed and consequently defined in separate pieces of legislation, statutes and other legal acts passed by the institutions concerned.
- **Concept of a modern university** – University as an institution which provides for teaching, studying and research at the highest level with a view to bring benefit and added value to the science and society as a whole should be ready and well equipped to successfully and autonomously manage institution of higher education in such a manner that it could compete at education market.
- **University mission** – One general and series of specific missions will be developed. General mission will proclaim the right to study and support to the freedom of critical and independent thinking and scientific work. Specific mission of the institution will refer to its more prominent role in professional education, creation of societal programs, improvement of the quality of services etc.
- **Full autonomy of university and academic freedom** which has to be reflected on numerous aspects such as: structure and election of managerial and academic bodies and their scope of competencies, relation to the state, guarantee rights of individuals and individual academic freedoms.
- **The role of state** – Institutions of higher education should be spared from any political influence. The state should perform oversight of university through a competent ministry.
- **Funding** – The state will assume responsibility for funding only public higher education institutions. It is recommended that the state allocates budget for one institution (university) and to leave this institution right and responsibility to manage the budget according to its needs and development plans. In that case new mechanisms of control and oversight of the funds should be established.
- **Centralization** – Strengthening the role of university in such way as to give legal entity status to universities only. This organizational principle will enable university to organize itself as the study programs joined by common managerial structure instead of institutions as it is now. It enables for better flexibility and productivity of university and better responsiveness to the needs of the society. It will also enable for implementation of the ECTS and setting up modular structure.
- **Strategic and transparent management of institution** – University management needs to be strategic, based on plans and created on long-term vision and pro-activity (two-way communication) in relation to society. The role of state has to be supplanted by autonomy based on responsibility and leadership of competent people and not politicians. That is why the central

managerial body is envisaged to reflect these principles. The rector's rights have to be broader and the emphasis has to be given to increased rights and duties entailed. Rector has to be given right to represent and manage institution in terms of articulating strategic commitments. The senate remains the highest academic body of university. Also, the students should get right to be appropriately represented in all higher education institutions.

- **Organization of studies and relevant diplomas/qualification** – In line with Bologna Declaration the two-tier degree system will be introduced – undergraduate and postgraduate. The duration of studies will be shortened at undergraduate level to minimum three years. Another important aspect thereof is introduction of the ECTS which will enable student mobility. Instead of two and more semester long modules, the tendency will be to reduce them to one semester courses. The core courses will be earmarked and as such should be obligatory, whereas the student will have opportunity to select modules according to his/her own needs to specialize in fields appropriate to his/her future careers. The problem of the extremely long period of study will be solved thereby. Instead of having examination after two or more semesters, the students will have shorter courses but more tests, colloquia, individual written reports and papers, workshops and presentations that will accommodate the principle of continuous learning process.
- **Quality assurance, self-evaluation and accreditation** – self-evaluation and external-evaluation system will be designed. It will enable for improvement of quality that will go beyond the level required by mere accreditation. In relation to this principle, the University of Montenegro has been granted TEMPUS funds for the project of Introducing Quality Assurance in the University of Montenegro. This project has already started and it is expected to be the first step forward in the reform process. It entails the three major steps: self-evaluation, external-evaluation and implementation of QA standards after corrective measures are taken. This is a project that will last for three years and it is expected to help introduce all other necessary changes in line with Bologna Process.
- **Foundation of new institutions of higher education** – Each new institution has to get appropriate accreditation and license from a competent body.

The University leadership has missed the opportunity to define principles of reform in better detail. It would give a clear-cut guidance for complex process of reforms. However, on the basis of these principles the draft law and draft statute were drafted. In addition to abundant expertise available and a lot of discussions that were held at university and in public that contributed to defining the provisions, the drafters have also relied on principles and formulations of higher education legislation from Kosovo that was drafted by international experts. The drafts have to be presented to university academic and administrative staff, students and other stakeholders.

The draft law really serves just as a framework, the draft statute goes into better detail stipulating more concrete aspects of university operation, whereas a lot needs to be done about drafting by-laws that will define introductions of changes and some new systems like ECTS, QA standards, modular studies etc.

University is expected to create forum for discussions as the new law will bring about a real overhaul of the previous, conservative structure of the University of Montenegro, that is higher education system in this country. Further discussions will be better articulated and enlightening because the two draft documents give good basis for that. Once they go public, the stakeholders will contribute their ideas and pose new challenges to the drafters. The reform leadership has failed to set the time-frame for that and what might ensue from this is that variety of interests and richness of interests blur the vision and dilute the process. This process is about to commence in February this year and it will hopefully be contributive and finite.

III. Conclusions

Reform process of higher education in Montenegro has been going on for long time now. However, it has been brought to a halt so many times so that it cannot be called a process but series of attempts instead.

The lesson learned so far is that the process should have started with a raising awareness or educational campaign. That campaign could have educated not only the stakeholders but the general public about the ideas underpinning Bologna Declaration and the idea of creating common European higher education space.

That campaign should have also been focused on raising awareness of the need to change the higher education system in Montenegro. Changing education system is the hardest reform one country can go by. Nations and people do tend to be very proud of their systems of education, particularly higher education systems, and tend to wrongfully judge from individual success stories that the whole system is a success. Montenegrin higher education leaders should have been aware of that.

Possible scenario is that the internal and external public will get overly critical about the needs, cost and content of reforms. University of Montenegro has missed an opportunity to conduct and shape discussions. Instead, university leaders will have to defend new concept and answer the questions instead of making the opposite, to put traditionalists, skeptics and status-quo supporters on the defense. It will take enormous time, effort and ideas to get the upper hand in that.

Another troubling dilemma facing the leadership of the University of Montenegro is how to try to generate support from teachers, administration and students of this University. The dilemma lies in the need to chose between top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top approach. Any of these two choices seems valid enough but the leaders still cannot decide. They have failed to convince their peers into the valid reasons to change the system according to the principles of Bologna process.

One thing that stands for sure is that a lot of time has passed (it will be five this year!) since the founder, the Government of Montenegro, asked the University to initiate changes and draft new legislation defining higher education space of Montenegro. The process has been overseen by three ministers, each of whom has come from

University, and who have been very concerned with changes to take place in this section of education.

Concurrently, the reform of elementary and secondary education has almost been completed with help of international organizations and it will definitely overshadow any discussion over reforms in higher education.

Possible scenario is that the Government will lose patience and handle the situation their own way. Academics will lose opportunity they have had for long time to shape their own system of education.

Even now that New Legal Framework has been adopted, the planned activities and proclaimed principles remain too general. Another problem that the reformers will have with that is the lack of termed-plans or, better say, time-table of the reform. There is another lesson learned from the reform activities done so far and that is if you do not assign deadlines, the things will surely take too long.

The most important lesson learned is left to the very end of this case study of the attempts to change rigid higher education system in Montenegro. The most important thing learned, though, is that legislation and 'legislative framework' are not the only things that should get reformed! How wrong it was to think like that! That was the mistake present in every single reform process in Montenegro up until recently. It is not enough to prescribe new rules of the game. What University of Montenegro should have done instead was to try to change the thinking and the very traditional concepts of higher education that have been complacently entrenched in peoples' minds for so long. And that is the most difficult to change. However, this is not to say it is impossible.

The leaders, having in mind their strong commitment and understanding for the need to reshape the system according to Bologna principles, should have created a set of messages and ideas to get across the board, at University, and then to whole society. Only after you know what you want you will be the best promoter of that idea of yours.

The reforms do not take place on the paper. They do, though, with real people and in real life. That is why the minds and conditions should have been prepared well before legislative changes are even considered.

In the end, the author should give a possible scenario of developments in higher education in his/her own country. I will decidedly end on more optimistic note. Namely, some other countries from the region, with which we used to share the same higher education space, have gone ahead with the reforms (Slovenia, Croatia etc.). Reformers of higher education in Montenegro will have a good opportunity to learn from successes and failures these countries have made. Thus, we would be able to apply many of the solutions they have come up with. These concepts will be adjustable to Montenegrin higher education context and our 'patience' has paid off eventually.