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# CRITERIA FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE EHEA

The two criteria for joining the EHEA approved by Ministers in Berlin in 2003 are the following:

* an applicant country needs to be a party to the European Cultural Convention;
* the competent public authorities of the applicant country need to commit to and implement the values, goals and key policies of the EHEA.

# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Within the deadline, on 1 November 2014, the Bologna Secretariat received the application from Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-2) to join the EHEA. The application consisted of a letter from the Minister of Education, Science and Technology of Kosovo, prof. Rame Buja, accompanying the questionnaire including the information provided by Kosovo to access the EHEA, and of a letter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Henver Hoxhaj. The application was presented during the BFUG meeting in Rome[[2]](#footnote-3) (27 and 28 November 2014) and the BFUG agreed on the following[[3]](#footnote-4):

* On the basis of the information provided by the Council of Europe, it is clear that Kosovo is not, at present, a party to the European Cultural Convention (ECC). However there is information that there might be movement before the Yerevan Ministerial Conference. In particular, the application of Kosovo is accompanied by a letter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating that Kosovo is expressing its “strong interest” in joining the ECC. The letter, in addition, refers to several official contacts between CoE and Kosovo;
* As, at the time of the BFUG meeting in November, it seemed possible that the situation concerning the participation of Kosovo in the ECC might change before the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan, a small group of experts was appointed in any case to assess the material and verify if the second criterion is fulfilled. The small group consists of the present and outgoing Co-Chairs of the BFUG (Latvia, Iceland, Italy and Holy See), the Secretariat and Armenia with the contribution of CoE.
* Kosovo has so far not submitted an application for accession to the ECC but has publicly announced it intends to apply for membership of the Council of Europe very soon. It is at present not known what the timetable for assessing such an application will be and what the decision by the Council's Committee of Ministers will be.

The present document is, therefore, the technical assessment of the candidature from Kosovo and contains an evaluation of the questionnaire submitted and all relevant elements to facilitate first the BFUG discussion and then Ministerial decision in Yerevan, if needed.

In the writing process, the only document consulted was the application submitted by the competent authorities in Kosovo (ref. to as “report 2014”).

The roadmap for the discussion of the present document and its content should be the following:

* BFUG Board meeting (Reykjavik, 23 February 2015);
* BFUG meeting (Riga, 24-25 March 2015).

# ELEMENTS FOR ASSESSING THE APPLICATION

The report 2014 has been completed by a team of twelve, and accompanies the formal letter requesting accession to the EHEA. The letter is signed by the Minister of Education and expresses the interest of Kosovo to meet the requirements for EHEA membership, as, for some time, it has been actively and consistently developing and orientating its higher education system towards achieving European standards. The contributors to the questionnaire include the Director for Higher Education, three consultants, one representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one from the Ministry of European Integration, two members of the Universities in Kosovo, one member of the QA Agency, one member of the Team for Higher Education Reforms (HERE), one member of the EU Office in Kosovo and one member of the Ministry of Higher Education. In the letter, it is expressed that the efforts to join the EHEA have been supported by the European Commission, by Austria, Germany and the UK.

The report 2014 is synthetic but includes all the main answers requested by the questionnaires. Where the information is not directly provided by the text, there are references to official sources of information, accessible online. As far as documentary work can do, it provides a reasonable picture of the situation of higher education in Kosovo.

## Overview of the national higher education system

The report 2014 distinguishes two main types of documentary references underpinning the higher education system in Kosovo:

* Strategic documents, namely “Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011 – 2016”, “Kosovo Higher Education Strategy 2005 – 2015” and “National Research Program”. The first two documents are reported to explicitly include measures to integrate Kosovo in the EHEA.
* Regulatory/normative documents, namely the Higher Education Law (2011) and connected bylaws.

The implementation of the strategy is reported to be assessed annually with the “Joint Annual Review”. All documents are accessible online (annex 2).

The body responsible for HE policy implementation and for licensing all HE institutions is the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST). The other main regulatory bodies are the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) and the National Qualifications Authority (NQA). The KAA is the independent, public agency responsible for accreditation of all public universities and private HE institutions (HEIs) offering academic degrees, whereas the NQA is a cross-ministry body, charged with developing the National Qualifications Framework, at all levels, to comply with needs of society and economy.

By law, the Municipality of North Mitrovica has some authority to exercise responsibility for the University of North Mitrovica[[4]](#footnote-5) that offers study programs in Serbian. Following political agreement sponsored by the EU, recently elected municipal authorities in North Mitrovica are expected to cooperate with the Government to ensure full integration of this university in the Kosovo system, and its participation in regional and international cooperation.

Kosovo has 7 public universities and 25 private colleges offering 418 study programs. Participation rate in higher education is at 67,7% of all persons aged 20 – 24. There are five languages of instruction: Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian, Turkish and English.

More detailed data on the 100.000 students enrolled and on staff are included in annex I of the report 2014.

The main challenges faced by the higher education system in Kosovo are reported. The table below summarizes the challenges and the measures to tackle them.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Challenge | Measure |
| Underdeveloped economy and large number of unemployed young people | Improvement in the links between higher education and employment and in the tools to respond to employers needs  Definition of labor market’s needs |
| Quality of higher education provision | Meet the demand for qualified academic staff to support a rise in the number of study programs |
| Cooperation with the region and integration in the EHEA | Simplify visa-related issues, tackle financial constraints and language problems |
| Institutional perspective of achieving three missions: research, teaching and services | Embed research amongst the purposes of higher education  Promote students–centred learning  Target the needs of society |

In addition, the report 2014 refers to additional measures intended to provide accurate labor market needs analyses and encourage the development of study programs meeting the demand. Finally, the Government intends to introduce an effective Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), which will strengthen the capacity of the Government and higher education institutions to develop sectorial evidence-based policies.

The report 2014 includes the reasons for the commitment of Kosovo. The first is the efforts made since 2003 to align with EHEA policies and tools. The second is the fact that two Kosovo Universities, Prishtina and North Mitrovica, are already members of the EUA, as confirmation of this commitment. Finally, formal accession to the EHEA would strengthen the implementation of Bologna requirements; improve international cooperation and mobility of academic staff and students; facilitate further development and improvement of the National Qualifications Framework; strengthen the quality assurance system; and eventually lead to development of joint degrees and international programs.

## Structural reforms

### Degree structure system/ Qualifications Frameworks/ Employability

The report 2014 states that Kosovo Government has been committed to the development of a national qualifications framework compatible with the overarching framework of the European Higher Education Area. For Kosovo, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is an important component within the reform of the Education and Training system. It is intended to improve access to work and further learning by ensuring that qualifications are relevant to employment and learning, and meet the needs of learners, of the economy, and of education and training institutions.

The basic structure is inspired to the 8 levels of the European Qualifications Framework with short cycle qualifications at level 5 and higher education qualifications at level 6, 7 and 8. In annex 3 of the report there is the scheme of the Framework mentioned. Each level has its own descriptors, also reported in annex 3, defined in terms of knowledge, skills and responsibilities. It is not the aim of the present document to assess the compatibility of the NQF of Kosovo with the Overarching Framework for the EHEA but it seems fairly coherent with OF – EHEA, to state a positive evaluation of the NQF.

The report 2014 states that, with few exceptions, HE programs are implemented on the 3/2/3 Bologna cycle scheme:

* Bachelor programs 3-4 years (180 - 240 ECTS credits)
* Master programs 1-2 years (60-120 ECTS credits)
* PhD programs last at least 3 years.

Annex 4 of the report 2014 includes the scheme of higher education qualifications for further information and clarifications.

The National Qualification Authority, a cross-ministry body, is charged to develop the NQF and to ensure that it complies with the needs of society and economy.

The report 2014 summarizes the efforts from the Ministry of Education, Technology and Research to develop the skills and competencies to be achieved by graduates in order to meet the needs of the labor market. These are included in the “Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011 – 2016” and are based on the assumption that graduates still face fewer difficulties in finding employment than other people. According to the report 2014, the measures include a more active involvement of employers in curriculum development and internships.

### Quality Assurance

As regards quality assurance, the starting point for the assessment is that in 2013 the Kosovo Accreditation Agency was accepted as full member of ENQA. This is a clear confirmation that the quality assurance system is compliant with the ESG.

For informative purposes, it is still considered useful to summarize the main features of the system.

The report 2014 confirms that licensing and accreditation are compulsory for all HEIs operating in Kosovo. Whereas license is issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) and represents the work permit, accreditation represents a formal acknowledgement that an Institution of higher education and its programs fulfill internationally recognized standards, and is issued or recognized by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA). Before applying for license to MEST, each HEI has to undergo institutional and program accreditation with the KAA.

The Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) has been operational since 2008 and is responsible for institutional and program accreditation in higher education. KAA supports the implementation of quality assurance measures at two levels: internal and external. For internal quality assurance KAA works closely with HEIs and supports them in developing and maintaining relevant structures and processes. All higher education institutions in Kosovo are required to have quality assurance offices and instruments of internal evaluation. QA guidelines have been developed for all HEIs. HEIs are required to produce self-evaluation reports and submit them along with applications for program or institutional accreditation

Since 2009, the KAA has made a priority of the specification of all degrees, at all levels, being given in terms of learning outcomes. With support from a number of Tempus-funded projects focused on learning outcomes, this has now been achieved and has enabled a competence-led approach to teaching and learning to be developed, and standards achieved to be more readily identified. KAA adopted a separate regulation for accreditation of PhD programs which sets additional requirements on HEIs wishing to offer such programs.

To ensure the integrity of the process, external evaluation is carried out by impartial international experts hired by KAA, whereas the nine-member National Quality Council, which is effectively the KAA Board and has three international members, reaches the final decision on accreditation. To strengthen international recognition of the standards and quality of the system, KAA has become a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA).

For the sake of accreditation of programs leading to regulated professions (architecture, medicine, pharmacy, nursing, etc.), Kosovo HEIs have to demonstrate that proper standards set forth by EU regulations have been applied

### Recognition of qualifications

The report 2014 briefly summarizes the practices for recognition, for the use of ECTS and delivery of the Diploma Supplement.

Kosovo NARIC office, established in 2008, assists in promoting the mobility of students, teachers and researchers by providing advice and information in relation to the academic recognition of diplomas and study periods undertaken abroad. Decisions on recognition are taken by the National Council for Recognition following procedures applied in most EU countries and in full compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to which Kosovo is not a Party. In general, all qualifications are recognized if they are awarded by institutions accredited by accreditation bodies in current membership of European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) or (in the United States) by an accreditation body which has been recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or by the United States Department of Education (USDE) or from both, or (in any other jurisdiction) has been accepted by the Ministry on a reciprocal basis as a properly constituted national or regional accrediting body, which is recognized and authorized by the relevant Ministry within that jurisdiction.

Implementation of ECTS and delivery of the Diploma Supplement are both reported to be in place, but without detailed information on their main features. ECTS credits are reported to be used in all institutions with the exclusion of the American University, which follows the US Credit system. Higher Education Law prescribes that every accredited provider of higher education in Kosovo has to provide each person awarded a degree or diploma with a diploma supplement in format set out by the MEST, without explicit mention of its correspondence with the European format.

Recognizing difficulties to meet the requirements issued by MEST, the Higher Education Reform Expert Team (HERE) and KAA provided some support to HEIs on the diploma supplement, and further support for improving the format and implementing the regulation is envisaged under IPA 2012 assistance.

# Other Key Areas

### Academic mobility

The report 2014 mentions all the international programs to which Universities of Kosovo are part of for the promotion of internationalization and of students/staff mobility. The main ones are CEEPUS, Erasmus Mundus and TEMPUS.

Nevertheless, the report 2014 mentions several obstacles strongly hindering the increase in the number of mobile students and staff and reducing the contribution to the 20% target. These are the restricted number of scholarships available, visa requirements and insufficient knowledge of English among academic staff and students. For the incoming students the main difficulty is the local language. In the past years, the report 2014 describes a special investment in PhD students outgoing mobility.

To improve mobility perspectives, the Ministry has encouraged the introduction of joint degree programs and programs taught in English, whereas Higher Education Reforms Experts (HERE) have facilitated the discussion on the topic of joint degrees.

## The Social Dimension of higher education

The report 2014 describes several measures to tackle the issue of social dimension:

* Low level of fees and fee waivers for students from low income families;
* Reduced accommodation fees;
* Need–based scholarships;
* Provision, in some Universities, of programs in Turkish and Bosnian languages;
* Quotas for accession in favor of students from ethnic minorities in programs where competition for access is very high.

The report 2014 does nott include any information on the social composition of the student body and it is not possible to comment on the state of play concerning the social dimension.

## Values and fundamental principles

### Academic freedom and institutional autonomy

The report 2014 states that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are guaranteed by the Higher Education Law (Article 13). There is a legal provision that the Government cannot impose any funding conditions restricting academic freedom (Article 22), whereas HEIs are required to have provisions in their Statutes that guarantee academic freedom of staff and students (Article 27). All providers of higher education enjoy full institutional autonomy in line with the Magna Charta principles, including election of governing and management bodies, and arranging their structures and activities through their own rules in conformity with the Law. We know from other sources that there are some issues of autonomy, e.g. When it comes to whether the Ministry can impose an access quota for children of war veterans on the University of Prishtina.

All public universities in Kosovo enjoy financial autonomy.

### Public responsibility for higher education

The report 2014 underlines that higher education provision is perceived as a public good and public responsibility. The Government policy is to provide access to public higher education to as many citizens as possible. To meet the demand, five new public universities where founded in addition to the University of Prishtina and the University of North Mitrovica, whereas participation figures have quadrupled in 10 years. The main challenge related to this approach is related to funding, therefore public universities are encouraged to leverage additional funding from their academic activity and cooperation with businesses.

### Cooperation among stakeholders and student participation

The major stakeholders in higher education listed in the report 2014 are higher education institutions, employers, student organizations, civil society organizations, as well as international development partners supporting Kosovo integration into the EHEA, which include Austria, EU and the US Government. Most of them actively participate in discussions on major issues and contribute to the development of higher education policies.

By Law, statutes of HEIs have to foresee creation of one or more organizations that represent students and contribute to the fulfillment of social, cultural, and academic requirements of students. Student organizations are fully autonomous, and the right to association is guaranteed. In public universities, students select their representatives in the Student Parliament through an election process open to all registered student organizations, and the Student Parliament appoints a certain number of students in the University Senate. Similar practices are applied in private Higher Education Institutions. The Ministry is facilitating establishment of the National Student Union with support from the Tempus Program.

# CONCLUSIONS

The information collected by reading the report 2014 includes several encouraging aspects of the candidature of Kosovo:

* The support by some EHEA countries in the development of higher education reforms (Austria, Germany and the UK) and of the European Commission;
* The integration of Kosovo HEIs and authorities in many international programs and initiatives;
* The constructive dialogue between Kosovo authorities and the Council of Europe and the stated intention of the Kosovo,authorities to apply for membership of the CoE, e en if the timeframe for and outcome of this application is not known at the time of writing;
* The recognition of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency by ENQA as full member.

Based on the information provided in the previous section, the picture emerging is that of a higher education system that is already implementing several structures of the EHEA and working on its main policy areas, with specific attention to quality, implementation of learning outcomes and student–centered learning, mobility and employability.

On the negative side, it could be argued that on some of the sections could have been explained and presented more in detail, as for the implementation of ECTS and DS or for the policies related to social dimension.

Even taking this into account, the conclusion of the assessment is positive, with reference to the second criterion for accession to the EHEA (“the competent public authorities of the applicant country need to commit to and implement the values, goals and key policies of the EHEA”).

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BFUG

As it was clarified in the opening section, there are two criteria to be fulfilled for accession in the EHEA, being party of the European Cultural Convention and the commitment of the competent public authorities of the applicant country to implement the values, goals and key policies of the EHEA.

The conclusions of the assessment for the fulfillment of the second criterion, as presented in the previous paragraph, are positive.

The recommendations to the BFUG are:

* To monitor, in close contact with the Council of Europe, the confirmation of the possible accession of Kosovo to the European Cultural Convention;
* To recommend that the Ministers meeting in Yerevan accept Kosovo as a new member of the EHEA, in case the process foreseen for the participation in the EEC are completed by Kosovo in time for the Yerevan Ministerial Conference - a prospect that now seems unlikely - or between the Yerevan and Paris conferences

1. All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. BFUG\_IT\_VA\_42\_12a [Application of the Republic of Kosovo to the EHEA membership] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. BFUG\_LV\_IS\_43\_3 [BFUG Rome outcome of proceedings] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The university itself uses the name “University of Prishtina temporarily located in Mitrovica”. This name is not accepted by the Kosovo authorities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)