

Welcome Address by Slobodan Filipović

Esteemed members of the Board,

It is my great honour to welcome you on behalf of the Ministry of Education and wish you a pleasant stay in our city. In the year of celebrating ten-year anniversary of renewed independence, Montenegro is extremely honoured to be co-chairing for the first time the meeting of the Bologna Follow-Up Group Board.

We are well aware that the Bologna Process has in many respects been revolutionary in terms of cooperation in the European Higher Education Area. Four Ministers of Education, who took part in a ceremony marking the 800th anniversary of University of Paris in 1998, shared the view that the segmentation of the European Higher Education Area was out-dated and harmful. One year later, the decision to engage in the process of creating the European Higher Education Area was formally made by 30 countries in Bologna.

The main objective of the Bologna Process, since it was initiated in 1999, was to create a comparable, compatible and coherent higher education system within the European Higher Education Area. Between 1999 and 2010, all efforts of Bologna Process members were aimed at creating such an area, which was finally achieved in March 2010 after the Declaration was adopted at the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference, on the tenth anniversary of the Bologna Process.

It is generally known that higher education is the backbone of every society and that the quality of higher education directly affects the quality of human resources in a country. Higher education in itself is a very complex system, an area that has been continuously exposed to changes and reforms during the past decade, as it is expected that the educational system follows the development of science and technology, offering different content and work methods, and thus providing students with competences for life and work in such a changing environment. It can be said that every aspect of higher education has been slightly altered, supplemented and reconstructed, and that all the changes that have been taking place are aimed at improving the quality of education and teaching. The quality can particularly be seen in the acquisition of knowledge and competences that are necessary to successfully meet the demands of a constantly changing and evolving society. The very fact that there has been a drastic increase in the number of students and the number of higher education institutions, and that over the past century higher education was transformed from an elite to mass phenomenon,

inevitably affects the changes in structure, organization and practice of providing education services.

The reform of higher education, and its alignment with the needs of labour market and economy, requires scientific and expert analyses and research, with special reference to its results and effects. The European Union ambitiously seeks to achieve the target that 40% of young people in the European territory should complete higher education by the year of 2020. However, a tendency to continuously increase the number of those who enter and complete higher education process makes sense only if it is accompanied by a decision and commitment to ensure the highest level of teaching and learning quality. Achieving certain results as well as the mentioned goals, implies cooperation and interaction of all aspects that are directly or indirectly involved in higher education. These aspects primarily relate to: teaching process organisation, curricular structure, teaching content, available literature, academic staff, the use of ICT in teaching, modern teaching methods, faculty equipment, personal traits of students and their learning approach.

One of the strategic goals of progress is the development and the establishment of a European knowledge-based society, which relies on two important elements - the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area.

Montenegro joined the Bologna Process in 2003 and has to this day remained an active participant. In the same year, the Parliament of Montenegro adopted a new Law on Higher Education harmonised with the Bologna Declaration principles, whereas one year after that, in 2004, all study programs were harmonised with the Bologna Process requirements. Students, who complete Bologna studies in Montenegro, receive ECTS points as well as Diploma Supplement.

In these new circumstances, students are identified as active partners in the educational, decision-making and policy-making process having their representatives in the Council for Higher Education, governing boards of universities, University Senates, faculty councils, commissions for drafting laws and regulations, and other relevant commissions and bodies. The established credit transfer system, led to new circumstances for improving student mobility. Montenegro is the beneficiary of many mobility and scholarship programs. Student mobility is realized on the basis of multilateral and bilateral agreements, adopted charters and declarations, as well as on the basis of scholarships offered by foreign governments, organizations or foundations. In order to promote mobility and provide support for students who take part in mobility programs, the Ministry also co-finances travel expenses for scholarship users. Furthermore, the Ministry co-finances tuition fees for Master and PhD students who meet the prescribed criteria.

With a view to further implementation of higher education reforms, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science have developed a project “Higher Education and Research for Innovation and Competitiveness”, funded from a World Bank loan, which covers the period from 2012 to 2018. Through this project, crucial reforms in higher education are being carried out, primarily in the area of financing, improving quality system, student standard, establishing national qualifications framework, as well as the improving the higher education information system.

Within the framework of this project, external evaluation of all higher education institutions in Montenegro was conducted in 2014. The evaluation was conducted by a team of independent international experts engaged by the European University Association, within the Institutional Evaluation Program. The evaluation process resulted in ten individual reports prepared for each higher education institution, as well as a cross-cutting system-wide summary report, identifying problems and challenges common for the entire sector. Experts from the Institutional Evaluation Programme particularly considered the following aspects: the three-cycle higher education system; relation between the number of academic staff and students (or student to teacher ratio); the integration of practical training in academic and applied study programs; the quality of doctoral studies, as well as the organizational aspects. For each of the specified fields they provided a set of recommendations for the improvement of identified deficiencies, both at institutional and national level.

Following the recommendations given in the evaluation report for the University of Montenegro, and international standards for accreditation, the University has carried out reforms and prepared a new structure of study programs. The reform orientation towards 3 + 2 + 3 model, in place of the dominant one 3 + 1 + 1 + 3, is explained by an approach to qualitative changes so as to achieve a certain standard in studying quality, involvement in the process of development and international mobility of both students and teachers, the possibility to use the best European experiences and make the greatest impact on the labour market.

Furthermore, a number of activities carried out within the same project are aimed at establishing a new, so-called contractual model of financing higher education, implementing Tracer Study, improvement of infrastructure at student dormitories, awarding scholarships for excellence to students of master’s, PhD and postdoctoral studies in line with the established criteria, as well as awarding institutional grants for conducting structural reforms.

Temporary closure of the negotiation Chapter 26: Education and Culture, serves as a confirmation that Montenegro is on the right track when it comes to integration related to this area. Closing the Chapter without the request to meet additional criteria

means that the national legislation in the field of education, culture, youth and sports is in line with the EU regulations, and that Montenegro actively participates in the open method of coordination, aimed at exchanging good practice with other countries, and benefits from the available EU programs and funds.

We will make good use of the period until Montenegro enters the European Union to conduct further activities on the improvement of quality of education and culture, and the implementation of recommendations we have received. We will actively work on establishing cooperation and intensifying mobility in the field of education, culture, youth and sports, as well as meeting the goals set by strategic documents which comply with the related strategic documents of the European Union.

In this manner we will go far toward making Montenegro even more recognised in the European Union as regards these areas, and more competitive on the European labour market.

In conclusion, I would like to wish you all successful work.