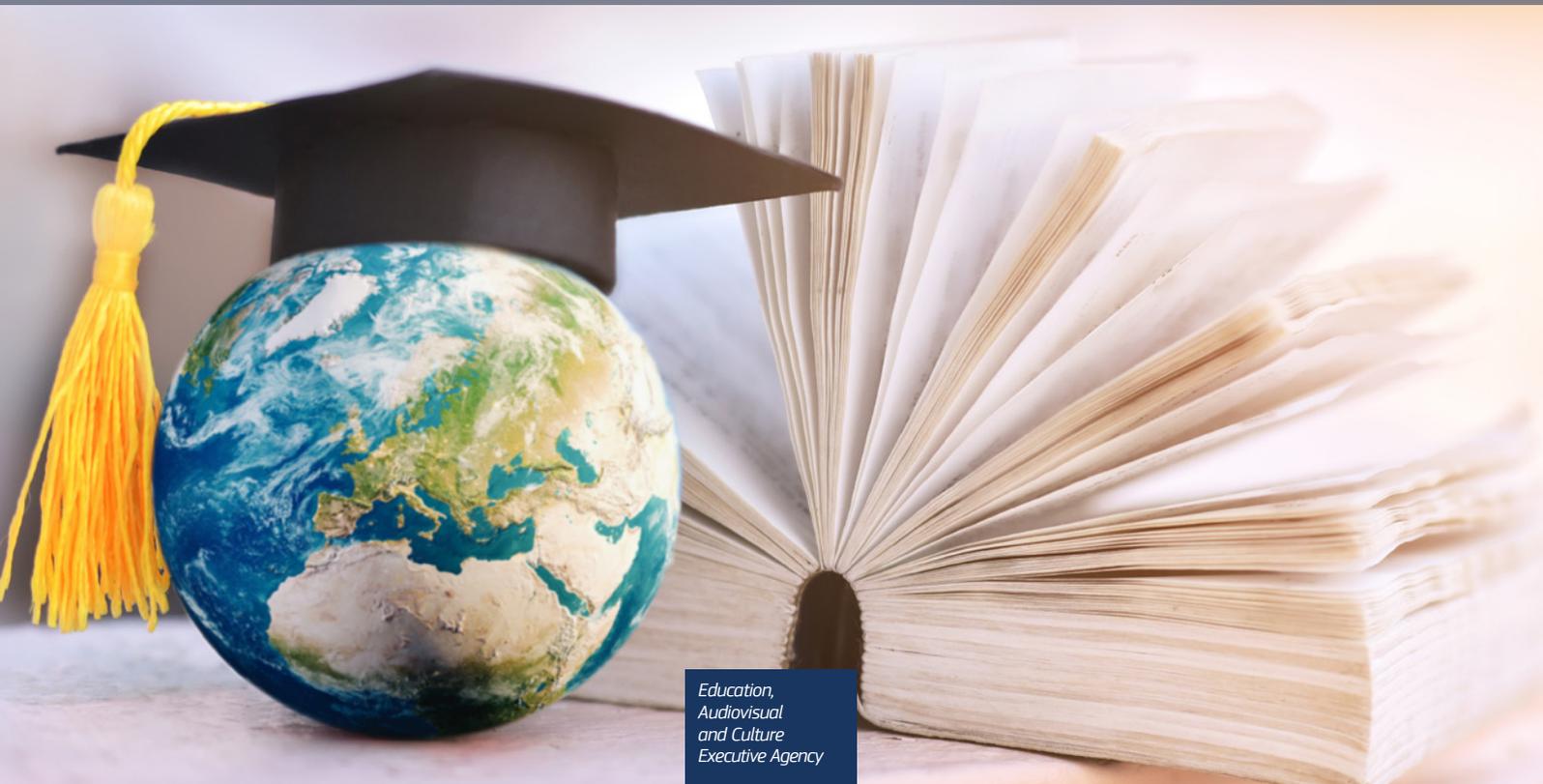




Erasmus+

Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action

Regional Report Western Balkans



More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://europa.eu>).

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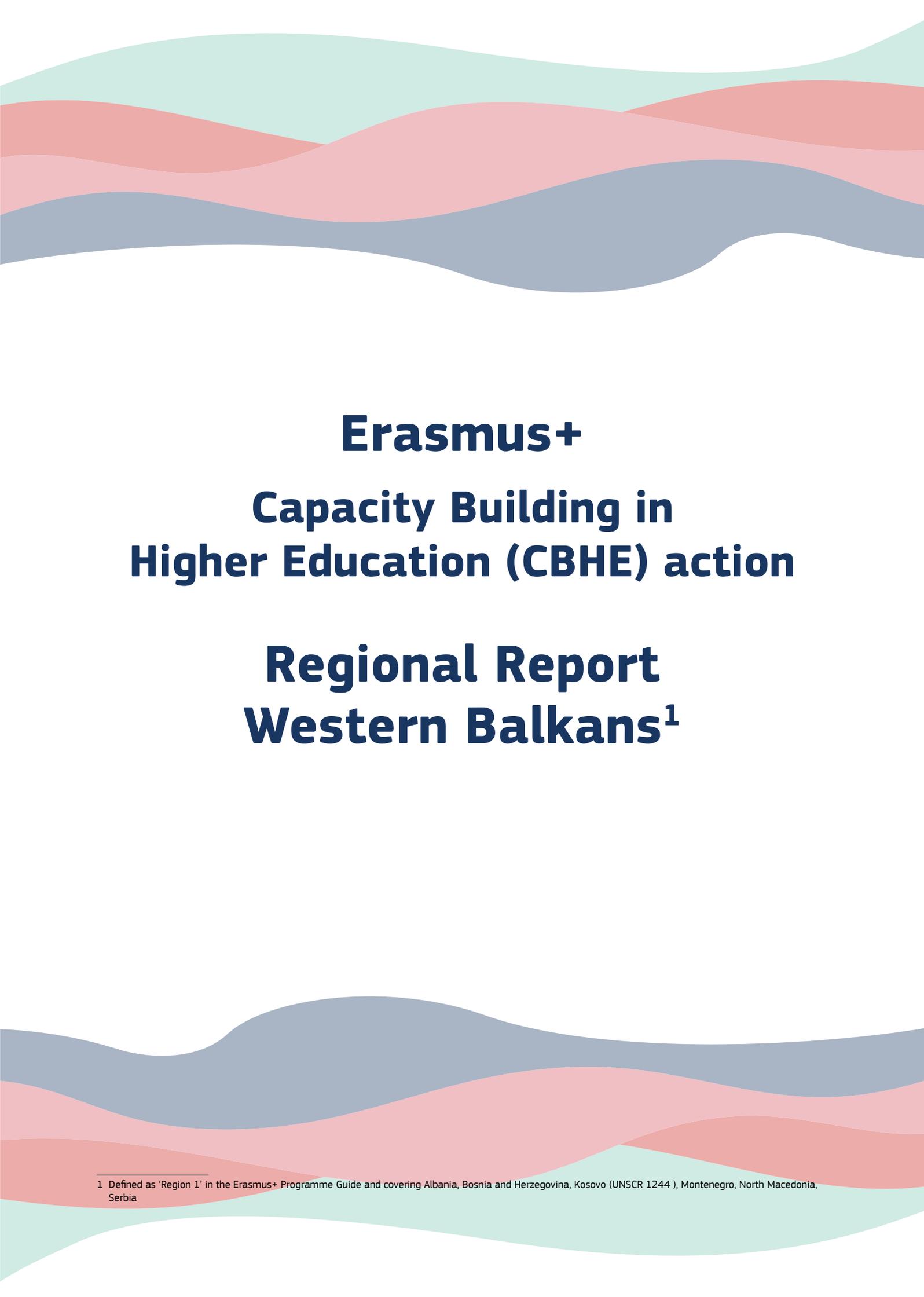
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Erasmus+
**Capacity Building in
Higher Education (CBHE) action**

**Regional Report
Western Balkans¹**

¹ Defined as 'Region 1' in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide and covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia



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1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE REPORT

This report is based on the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency's evaluation of the first final project reports of the first generation of CBHE projects selected for funding in 2015. Altogether 138 projects were funded in 2015² and 88 finalised projects have submitted their final reports in 2019, among which 15 were implemented in the Western Balkans.

The report's results are therefore based on a relatively small sample of finalised CBHE projects³ and are to be considered as preliminary and to be reviewed at a later stage. The analyses takes also into account the institutional monitoring visits and cluster meetings that were organised by the Agency as part of its monitoring strategy.

The report is analysing the role of the CBHE action as regards **the impact and sustainability of the funded projects** together with their **inclusiveness** (participants with disadvantaged backgrounds and fewer opportunities compared to their peers). More specifically, the report will look into the institutional development of HEIs (HEI), their modernisation of study programmes and their teaching and learning methodologies, structural reforms and the strengthening of HEI's technical capacities. It will zoom into the **opportunities created for individuals** (students, academic and administrative staff) and third parties like enterprises, chambers of commerce, etc.

The report will also examine how the EU projects have influenced **national policy developments in the education sector**, mainly but not exclusively through 'Structural Projects'. Special attention is given to the strengthening of **regional cooperation** through CBHE projects that include two or more countries from the same Region.

Finally, the analyses will be used to identify **challenges** and provide a **set of recommendations** for future reference.

2 CBHE projects have a funding between EUR 500,000 and 1 million and normally last 3 years; with very few shorter projects of 2 years duration. A high percentage of projects asked for a contract extension to catch up with implementation delays and will last between 3-4 years.

3 There are about 700 running projects after 5 annual calls, starting in 2014

2. INTRODUCTION

The CBHE action of the Erasmus+ Programme supports the modernisation and development of HEIs and the educational systems in the Partner Countries. Capacity Building projects are expected to have a long-term structural impact and their direct influence is on institutions and educational systems rather than on individuals.

European HEIs have a key role to play in supporting the modernisation efforts of emerging and developing parts of the world. Via the development of the educational systems of Partner Countries, they contribute to a sustainable development of the economies and societies as a whole and they allow addressing challenges at national, regional or even global level (e.g. climate change). In this context, the involvement of national authorities (Ministries of Education) plays a critical role.

International consortia of HEIs (including private businesses) strengthen the quality of Higher Education in the Partner Countries by providing to students new and upgraded skills needed in the labour market, introduce innovative approaches in teaching and learning and provide entrepreneurial skills.

The CBHE action is implemented through two types of projects, which aim to have an impact on HEIs or on the educational system as a whole. **‘Joint projects’** are aimed at the development of HEIs (e.g. curriculum development, governance of institutions, etc.), while **‘Structural projects’** address important challenges for the educational systems of the Partner Countries (accreditation, quality assurance in education, PhD education, etc.).

Both project types address one of the following **three pillars**

1. Curricula Reform
2. Modernising university governance and management
3. Strengthening of relations between HEIs and the wider economic and social environment

based on *pre-established national⁴ and/or regional priorities*.

The countries of the **Western Balkans** have been involved in the CBHE action from the very beginning of the E+ programme in 2014.

Serbia became a Programme Country in 2019 as a clear outcome of the EU's wider cooperation with the Western Balkans following the adoption of the new EU-Western Balkan Strategy⁵.



⁴ For the ex-Tempus countries defined by the Ministries of Educations of the Partner Countries.

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

3. CBHE IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Higher education systems in the Western Balkans are facing a number of challenges. Growing levels of student enrolment throughout the Region are straining the limited resources of public universities. At the same time, the number of private institutions has increased rapidly. Economic recovery after the economic crises hitting the whole continent and especially the Western Balkans has been relatively weak and unsteady. This is partly due to the poor performance of the labour market as reflected in very low employment rates and high levels of unemployment, leading to a brain drain among graduates and a lack of regional university cooperation.

Structural reforms are a key element of public policies for improving competitiveness, upgrading skills of the work force and underpinning the economic growth needed to catch up with the EU countries during the prolonged pre-accession period. Among the reforms required, upgrading labour force skills (last but not least to attract foreign investment) is an essential element of the structural reform processes.

The CBHE action targets the above-mentioned challenges through the implementation of international cooperation projects. The results accomplished have affected the modernisation and reform of higher education in the Western Balkans. HEIs and individuals (staff and students) have benefited from institutional and study programme reforms by using and mainstreaming results of CBHE projects, primarily related to creating new curricula, modernisation of university structures and updating educational processes. In some cases, the CBHE project outputs also triggered changes at a national level through directly or indirectly influencing the structure and legislative framework of higher education.

The CBHE action applies both a bottom-up and a top-down strategy to align national decision making with priorities of university development and internationalisation (fostering the Bologna process and tools). However, effective impact on the normative and hence structural level often remains disconnected from legislative and administrative reforms. Attainments directly traceable to CBHE projects are visible mainly in curriculum developing: creating new student-centred study programmes at Bachelor and Master Level and their national accreditation.

The achievements obtained through CBHE projects, in particular the introduction of quality assurance procedures and new and updated degree programmes, have provided students in the Region with possibilities that could not have been realised without the input of the European partner institutions. Tangible results become highly visible through the setting-up/ improvement of laboratories, library systems and other student-oriented structures and services at university level. This has had an effect on the educational excellence and distinction of the participating HEI in the Partner Countries and hence the quality of training offered to their students.



The support of the management of HEIs and of national authorities is pivotal in this context and vital for the sustainability of the achieved project results. The CBHE action has enhanced considerably the capacities of universities in the Region to manage international cooperation projects.

- ▶ In Serbia for example, 28% of the funded projects are managed by Serbian co-ordinators (cf 10% in Albania).

Thanks to CBHE projects with European partners, **bridges** have been built for **intra-national**, regional or cross-regional cooperation that otherwise are unlikely to have occurred due to the national/regional/cultural and sometimes academic disconnection in the Western Balkans after the violent conflicts in the 90s and the ongoing political tensions.

3.1. Institutional Development

3.1.1. Curricula Reform

One of the main objectives of the CBHE action is curricula reform. Partner Country HEIs work together in high quality international consortia to revise study programmes or to develop new ones, to engage in new learning and teaching methods and to prepare students with new and better skills for a changing job market and a developing economy.

- ▶ Almost 50% of all CBHE projects in the Region selected for funding focus deal with curriculum reform. In 2015 projects, based on the information available in the final reports, 361 courses were newly developed/updated. Of seven curriculum development projects of the 2015 generation, two have developed courses taught in a foreign language (English).

The modernisation and launching of new study programmes and the introduction of innovative learning and teaching methods (not previously available in the Western Balkans) have significantly changed the landscape of the university sector. Curricula reform projects have been highly sustainable, since all newly created study programmes at graduate and postgraduate level have become an integral part of regular degree programs taught at the HEIs:

Waste management curricula development in partnership with public and private sector (561821-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

A new master programme in the Waste Management sector was introduced at 5 HEIs in Serbia. It includes a sustainable model of student industrial placement through expanded partnerships with businesses. Private sector partners participated actively in project activities.

For many Partner Country HEIs the collaboration with European universities on curricula development implied an exposure to the **Bologna Process methodology**. Hence, when developing new curricula and considering student mobility opportunities, ECTS was introduced, student- centred learning approaches (learning outcomes) and a (3+2) year degree system used:

Modernising geodesy education in Western Balkan with focus on competences and learning outcomes (Geoweb) (561902-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP).

A specific curriculum in Geodesy was developed in line with the Bologna Process principles of competence-based learning outcomes. At the same time, teaching staff were trained through dedicated intensive courses. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) pedagogy was also introduced to foster active learning.

Many HEIs have embraced the Bologna Process as a means of supporting mobility with European HEIs. In some countries, nationwide working groups on the Bologna Process were created to promote the use of the methodology:

Strengthening of Internationalisation in B&H Higher Education (STINT) (561874-EPP-1-2015-1-BE-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP)

Within the STINT project, the model of recognition of students and staff mobility was developed and was later on adopted by all public HEIs in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Specific remarks

Though most countries in the Region have introduced higher education laws and strategies for the adoption of the Bologna principles, the concern remains that this was not applied strictly to allow **profound reforms of teaching practices and curricula**. Challenges exist in particular in the areas of transparency, transferability, recognition and quality of teaching.

Not all study programmes started during the CBHE project's implementation period or immediately after the project completion. This is because of the long time required for study programme accreditation and the reform of the education system. Therefore, some study programmes could only be launched after the end (eligibility period) of the project. Furthermore, curricula development projects often **lack guidelines for students and a proper information policy about the new possibilities**, which is a deficiency for this type of project. In general, the involvement of students as end beneficiaries is not sufficiently considered. In most of the cases student involvement in curriculum development takes place only at end for testing purposes and on an individual bases. While there are many active student associations (e.g. the 'Western Balkan Erasmus Alumni Association') these are not normally involved in project consortia, which is definitely not working for the benefit of the CBHE projects.

3.1.2. Technological Upgrade

The provision of funds to improve the technical structure of Partner Country HEIs is an important element of CBHE and the provision of **equipment** plays an important role (often almost one third of the total grant). It is an attractive offer to universities, which often lack modern and labour market orientated training facilities.

- ▶ Approximately EUR 3.2 million were invested in equipment for the 15 projects implemented in the Western Balkans.

Adequate provision of equipment in laboratories and centres is vital for supporting practical coursework, especially in the natural and hard sciences. Provision of equipment allows the establishment of facilities like career advice centres, innovation and start-up centres. The new facilities are frequently used to train private or public employees, who otherwise would not have access to such important support structures. Sometimes this even happens on a fee-paying basis, thus contributing to the project's impact and financial sustainability:

**Implementation of the study program - Digital Broadcasting and Broadband Technologies (Master studies) (DBBT)
(561688-EPP-1-2015-1-XK-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

Seven laboratories for the training in DBBT have been set up and been equipped in Western Balkan HEIs to provide students with theoretical and practical know-how and skills.

The strengthening of HEI technical capacities by opening new laboratories for teaching is an obvious measure for CBHE projects. Additionally these labs are often used to conduct research and create hence a vital bridge between teaching and research. This is of utmost importance for the Western Balkan universities where research and teaching were strictly separated, in particular in former Yugoslavia and in Albania.

CBHE projects also strengthened the digitalisation of education by using various IT tools in the teaching process and by creating online learning platforms:

**Introduction of part-time and short cycle studies in Serbia (PT&SCHE)
(561868-EPP-1-2015-1-EE-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP)**

This project adopted a personalised e-learning system, allowing each student to configure their own online lessons, selecting only the needed knowledge units (learning objectives). Each online lesson has a specified learning and assessment process managed for each student separately. This innovative online tool has optimised learning paths of students according to their current knowledge, learning styles and specific learning outcomes.

Enhancement of HE research potential contributing to further growth of the WB region (RE@WBC) (561586-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Via this project, a plagiarism detection tool was installed in all partner universities from Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, at each of the Western Balkan universities, a researchers' website was built-up to keep researchers updated about job vacancies, project calls, conference announcements, publishing opportunities and other information relevant to their future career development.

Specific remarks

Though the possibility of buying project specific equipment is important, there are a number of projects in which equipment was used for general purposes like the provision of laptops to students and teachers. These purchases were not indispensable for the implementation of the CBHE project and it is also not sure if this kind of equipment remains with the universities after the projects' end.

In certain cases, the required maintenance of equipment and a follow-up financing is not ensured. Sometimes the reason for this is the lack of the universities' financial autonomy, which can be observed in particular in Kosovo and Albania.

Moreover, many HEIs reported challenges in the handling of the tendering procedures when equipment was not available in their country but had to be imported. Since different tendering rules had to be followed, the universities faced a multilayer bureaucracy.

3.1.3. Governance and Management Reform

Western Balkan universities' governance/management bodies still require institutional strengthening to be able to compete with European and worldwide universities. HEIs in the Partner Countries need to improve the efficiency of their governance processes and their structures to make them grow internationally and offer study programmes of high quality, which attract the interest of academics, students and the society at large. This implies among other things, sustainable strategies and regulations, efficient international relation offices, quality assurance units endorsing international and European standards, financial autonomy, structures for collaborating with the labour market and strong alumni associations.

CBHE projects have clearly contributed to the creation or reinforcement of university bodies and changes at institutional level. Examples include the reinforcement of Quality Assurance units, the strengthening of international relation offices or creating alumni associations:

Strategic support on strengthening the quality assurance structures at the private HEIs in Albania (QAinAl) (561510-EPP-1-2015-1-AT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

This project supported the quality assurance structures / offices at the private HE institutions in Albania, provided capacity building on quality assurance and action plans and guidelines supporting the processes of quality assurance and enhancement in teaching, learning and administration.

However, much remains to be done in the area of governance and management reform for the Western Balkan HEIs. Possibly new CBHE projects could support the efficiency of the structures in place (e.g. approaches to involve stakeholders in governance, especially employers and alumni), digitised procedures, optimised processes, and mechanisms to trace the employability of the graduates, etc.

3.1.4. HEI International strategies

The internationalisation of higher education in the Western Balkans is high on the political agenda of governments and HEIs. However, while in Europe internationalisation is considered as a vehicle for enhancing the competitiveness of HEIs and economies, in the Western Balkans it is seen primarily as a mean of supporting national reforms and institutional capacity building. The higher education systems in the Region cannot compete with the more established and highly internationalised educational systems in Europe and elsewhere. However, internationalisation offers a chance to gradually get involved and to improve and develop through cooperation with strong European partner institutions.

Individual academics remain the most important driver of international cooperation in the Region. It is through bottom-up initiatives of academics that short-term mobility, research cooperation, development of joint-study programmes, and other activities are being developed. While there is a high level of commitment to internationalisation almost everywhere, these academics often do not receive sufficient support to enact their cooperative ventures. University practices and support services are not sufficiently adapted to serve this goal. Internationalisation efforts are hampered by certain shortcomings throughout the Region, such as weak International Relations Offices (IROs), an insufficient number of courses offered in foreign languages, relatively poor foreign language skills among students and academics in some countries, and weak support for finding and managing research funding. However, the intensity of these shortcomings varies significantly across the countries.

Numerous strategic and procedural documents were created and adopted aiming at supporting the internationalisation and modernisation at the institutional level, like guidelines for learning outcomes at HEIs, strategies for university internationalisation, systems for monitoring the quality of the education process, adoption of protocols and procedures, which help improving the service provided by the international relations offices.

Moreover, the CBHE projects have **increased the visibility** of the HEIs involved, through their strong outward orientation and focus on international cooperation. One of the most visible aspects of the projects' impact is the establishment of an informal Erasmus+ academic and administrative coordinators network, which often closely cooperates with the central university management and across the whole Western Balkans. This change significantly improves the support provided to students and staff interested in mobility at the university/faculty level. The improvement of universities' capacities can be observed by the fact that all major Serbian HEIs obtained within the last two years an **Erasmus University Charter**. This was a necessary requirement for Serbia to participate in the Erasmus+ Programme when becoming a Programme Country.

Via the CBHE projects, Western Balkan HEIs managed to undertake also activities in relation with the third mission of higher education. They established cooperation with the non-academic sector, which increases the impact of the projects:

Institutional framework for development of the third mission of universities in Serbia (IF4TM) (561655-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP)

The IF4TM project successfully managed to improve the national framework by supporting third mission activities, in particular: to develop at 7 Serbian HEIs the institutional framework for the third mission, to introduce an Operational Manual and metrics for monitoring of third mission activities, to introduce seven INNO platforms for innovation management, to adopt a University CB programme for intellectual property and innovation management and to establish five Creativity Centres in Serbia.

Entrepreneurial Universities for Industry Alliance (EUFORIA) (561695-EPP-1-2015-1-UK-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

The project developed links between universities and enterprises to enhance teaching and learning and for upgrading curricula in line with the needs of enterprises.

Additionally, CBHE projects have supported the institutions to adopt a more multidisciplinary approach to curricula development in line with the Bologna principles.

- For the 2015 generation of projects implemented in the Western Balkans out of seven Curriculum Development CBHE projects, one covers Interdisciplinary study programmes.

Lastly, the participation of the Partner Country institutions in CBHE projects has strengthened the **integrative function of most public universities** vis-à-vis the faculties that are their constitutive elements in relation to international cooperation.

The performance of HEIs is often measured on the basis of their research output and quality. Opening HEIs up to global standards and benchmarks has motivated them to work on the continuous improvement of their systems and processes:

Strategic support on strengthening the quality assurance structures at the private HEIs in Albania (QAinAl) (561510-EPP-1-2015-1-AT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

The objective of this project was not merely to produce a Quality Assurance Action Plans, but to establish and support quality assurance processes and mechanisms of quality assurance, mainly by building-up the capacity of the university stakeholders to undertake internal self-assessment processes.

Enhancement of HE research potential contributing to further growth of the WB region (RE@WBC) (561586-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Within this project, trainings for trainers were organised and a strategy of continuous training of researchers in the Western Balkan universities was adopted with a view of establishing a regular practice of continuous training of researchers in different topics.

The process of internationalisation has however not yet shown a significant impact on the rankings for HEIs, the only exception being the University of Belgrade, which improved its ranking on the Shanghai list from position 400 to 301 last year. When it appeared for the first time on in the Shanghai list, it ranked in the group of universities between 401 and 500 and it was the only Western Balkan university on the list.

Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the impact on the institutional level (that has been measured via an auto-evaluation) has been considered by the participants overwhelmingly as accomplished.

3.2. Broadening Horizons for Individuals

3.2.1. Academic staff

The CBHE action has given professors from Partner Countries the opportunities to meet their peers in different countries. By working together in international consortia, professors have become aware of different perspectives, gained new insights into their academic field and were exposed to international quality standards in education. The CBHE projects have allowed them to collaborate with experts in their area leading to a direct peer-to-peer knowledge transfer from Europe to the Partner Countries. They have also gained valuable work experience through the teaching of students in a different country and from different countries (sometimes in a foreign language), especially through the 'Special Mobility Scheme' of the CBHE action:

School-to-Work Transition for Higher education students with disabilities in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina (Trans2Work) (561847-EPP-1-2015-1-EL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

In the framework of this project, 30 students from Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina had the opportunity to carry out a 3 months internship experience in EU countries. The contacts built have proven extremely useful for pursuing further research and enhancing their publications list. Contacts made with European professors, have led to further collaborations activities after the end of the project. This has improved the long-term impact of the projects' outcomes.

Curriculum Development Joint European Political Science MA" (euroPS) (561485-EPP-1-2015-1-AT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Based on the module for teaching European integration developed by the project, a network of specialists has built up a cooperative and complementary expert network. The network has reinforced the teaching of EU integration topics and built up Policy Labs for the integration of stakeholders in the Western Balkans to strengthen their expertise and to get incentives for applied research and teaching activities.

Creating the Network of Knowledge Labs for Sustainable and Resilient Environments (KLABS) (561675-EPP-1-2015-1-XK-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

This project has contributed to signing three inter-institutional agreements between EU and Western Balkan universities in the frame of the International Credit Mobility action.

Two different categories of academics can be distinguished, namely experienced academics and young academics at the start of their carrier:

- (a) Those academics advanced in their career, but limited as regards further vertical growth at their home universities are offered a new lease of life, opening new doors and allowing them to broaden their perspectives, by bringing an international dimension to their work. However, for the same reason this also means that not always, the leading academics in a field are participating in the CBHE projects and a monopolisation inside the HEIs can be noted. Access to EU projects is regarded as 'territorial gain' and not necessarily as something to be shared. This holds true also for Programme Country staff members for the same reasons and is leading to networks of these 'peer groups' risking to produce 'mediocre' project outcomes. It also needs to be outlined that the motivation to be part of a CBHE project is not always only connected to the project's content or cooperation aspects but also to the **generous funding** that the CBHE project offers for personnel costs of professors. The additional remuneration is covering tasks that should be part of the normal tasks of the academics, namely the updating of their degree programmes in the case of curriculum development projects.

This goes 'hand in hand' with the **one size fits all programme structure** of the CBHE action that makes it possible for academics/universities to place a huge variety of project ideas with their applications. Academics and 'professional project writers' sell/recycle project ideas that do not always correspond to the real needs of the HEI in the Western Balkans (and other Regions) and the CBHE action suffers from a high number of 'recurrent beneficiaries'.

- (b) Young academics are provided with the possibility to take over leadership for project packages and are exposed to an international working level. They get access to EU funding which prevents a further brain drain in the Western Balkans.

In general, trainings and workshops organised within the CBHE projects allowed academics to get new skills and knowledge in various disciplines:

Modernising geodesy education in Western Balkan with focus on competences and learning outcomes (Geoweb) (561902-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Among other activities, 4 intensive training courses were organised for academics in view to learn how to teach geodesy disciplines in line with the new technologies. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) pedagogy was also introduced with the aim to foster active learning.

Strategic support on strengthening the quality assurance structures at the private HEIs in Albania (QAinAl) (561510-EPP-1-2015-1-AT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

This project included training for academics on quality assurance in higher education.

- ▶ In the 15 Western Balkan projects **6192 instances of training of academic staff** were reported, which mostly took place at Programme Country institutions. The new skills and knowledge also strengthen the home HEIs and improve education standards.

The CBHE action allowed academics to overcome national boundaries and also to link with other disciplines within their HEI. EU countries have been experimenting with **multidisciplinary courses** for some time and most academics recognise the benefits. Therefore, this concept was also introduced in certain Partner Countries and helped to promote innovation and synergies between departments, and broaden the academics/institutions way of thinking.

Working with the **private sector** within a CBHE project has been a new experience for many professors. They have gained greater insights into business realities and could make the study programmes more relevant to business needs:

Waste management curricula development in partnership with public and private sector (WaMPP) (561821-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

A strong partnership was created between HEIs and private entities in the waste management sector in Serbia. A model for student industrial placement was introduced together with the utilisation of ICT technologies for modern training courses to facilitate open-access opportunities for continuous professional development of employees in the budding Waste Management sector.

Furthermore, CBHE projects opened the door for academics to **university management**. This was observed especially during the Agency's monitoring visits, which took place in the presence of the university management. It turned out that professors working on CBHE projects in different departments were often not aware that other colleagues in their HEI were also working on CBHE projects. Hence, it was through the Agency's monitoring visit that a connection between different CBHE projects was established. By the same token it also became clear that some HEI managers were unaware of the activities taking place on the ground, which shows that **proper monitoring is missing** and thinking of 'internationalisation' in a strategic manner is often not yet in place.

The CBHE action gave staff from the Region the opportunity to **develop their intercultural skills**, by working together with colleagues in a multi-country consortium. Academic and administrative staff gained intercultural experience of working with EU countries and with their neighbouring countries, which is not obvious in the Western Balkans. Often only within an EU-funded international consortium it becomes possible to receive endorsement by both the HEI and the national authorities to collaborate with HEIs from neighbouring countries (or even in the same country in the case of Kosovo).

Many stakeholders complain about the lack of job-readiness of HE graduates in the Western Balkans, while others report graduates' lack of interactive skills, IT skills, organisational skills, and ability to work in teams. HEIs are seen as focusing on theoretical knowledge to the detriment of providing graduates with practical knowledge and experience, which is a key concern of employers. In addition, the curricula of many study programmes fail to reflect the combination of skills that employers seek.

3.2.2. Students

One of the main drivers of internationalisation has been the need for universities to attract better students and professors to raise the level of education offered and to become more competitive in the global education market. The CBHE action has helped HEIs to set up high-level study programmes, which increased the visibility and attractiveness of the HEI in the national context and contributed to stopping brain drain. Cooperation with EU partners also provides students with guarantee as regards the **fair treatment of their merits** in societies that are marked by **nepotism and corruption**.

- ▶ Within the 15 Western Balkan CBHE projects, 3,808 students were enrolled in new or upgraded courses and 12,400 students received training or took part in a mobility.

The impact of the CBHE projects on students has been multifold. They have been beneficiaries of modernised or new study programmes and have been exposed to innovative teaching

and learning methods and motivational approaches. The work with new or improved equipment/infrastructure, interchanging with foreign academics, using new methodologies and short and long-term mobility (available to all three cycles) have enhanced both the academic and practical competences of students.

There are numerous examples **of joint research projects and joint publications** initiated after successful cooperation within CBHE projects. In fact, this research work takes place in parallel to the CBHE project. The mobility of staff and students has allowed the **supervision of doctoral candidates by staff from international partners**, improving the quality of research and enhancing the reputation of the associated HEI.

Graduate **entry to the labour market** in the Western Balkans is often precarious and they experience shorter or longer periods of unemployment before they find stable employment. This transition from the academic world to the labour market is hampered by a relatively low level of cooperation between HEIs and employers in relation to curriculum design and recruitment. Few employers are involved in the discussions of new curricula.

The CBHE action **strongly encourages cooperation of HEIs with the labour market**. In a number of projects, private sector representatives are involved in designing new curricula that are more appealing and relevant for the business world. Professors who internalise this entrepreneurial and long-term perspective have been the standard-bearers of this cooperation, which translated into internships for students and, in some cases, job offers after graduation. Evidence shows that curriculum development projects working closely with private sector partners and including internships within university education have a higher graduate employability rate and are therefore much more attractiveness to national and international students.

However, despite notable exceptions (see below) the overall involvement of private business partners in HEI curricula development is limited and lags behind expectations:

Implementation of the study program – Digital Broadcasting and Broadband Technologies (Master studies) (DBBT) (561688-EPP-1-2015-1-XK-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

This project contributed to reinforcing the HEI-Enterprise cooperation. Western Balkan HEIs signed long-term cooperation agreements with 16 business partners. These companies agreed, inter alia, to provide professional advice on curricula specifications, internships, practical teaching and co-mentoring.

Some CBHE projects include concrete support structures, such as career centres, incubators or students support services, which have developed strategic and sustainable links with the labour market and **provide training in soft and transversal skills**:

Enhancement of HE research potential contributing to further growth of the WB region (RE@WBC) (561586-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

In this project, training were organised to improve the skills of creativity, initiative and entrepreneurship. The project worked on transversal skills, such as the ability to learn and take initiative, which helped individuals to deal with today's varied and unpredictable career paths. Entrepreneurial skills were also developed to enhance employability of young people and support new business creation.

- ▶ Overall **53%** of the 2015 generation of CBHE projects include placements and internships for students. Thanks to CBHE projects, many students established their first contacts with the private sector and this interaction increased their employability.

A number of the HEIs are involved in projects to set up **language-learning centres** or to improve the **language skills** of students, who enjoyed this linguistic training by attending newly developed English courses, joining mobility opportunities and accessing research material in foreign languages.

Although the students are the main end beneficiaries of the CBHE projects, they have only been sporadically involved in project activities. The development and modernisation of curricula and therefore the identification of student needs for their future, is seen as the domain of the HEI and their academic staff. In Western Balkan countries, CBHE projects have not yet reached the point where students participate in building their future. Lack of active involvement of students in the implementation of project activities is the recurrent outcome of the various cluster meetings organised by the Agency in the Western Balkans.

3.2.3. Administrative staff

CBHE projects also have an impact on administrative staff. This relates particularly to staff from the **offices for International Affairs and staff responsible for project financial management**, who have to be well acquainted with the regulations and procedures relating to project implementation.

Although administrative and financial staff are key persons in international cooperation, their role is not always very visible in the project activities. Moreover, given the nature of their work, they are rarely the first to participate in mobility opportunities. However, regular interaction via email and skype with their counterparts in other countries has brought learning opportunities and given

them insights into best practice in financial and grant management. Sometimes, they have been able to **introduce new practices in their own HEI systems**. Dealing with international projects, they have to work in English and in this way, considerably improving their language skills. The equipment budget has allowed administrative staff to purchase new technology and to use their newly acquired skills for the benefit of their home HEI. Some CBHE projects specifically target administrative staff:

Library Network Support Services: modernising libraries in Western Balkan countries through staff development and reforming library services (LNSS) (561987-EPP-1-2015-1-IE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Librarians from Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo were the main target group of the LNSS project. Eight specific modules were delivered, new equipment and technologies adopted and new professional profiles have been introduced. As a result, library staff were equipped both to provide quality library training to all stakeholders in critical areas such as Information Discovery & Avoiding Plagiarism and to manage and operate modern library services to support teaching and learning.

- ▶ In total, 906 administrative staff members of Western Balkan universities were trained within the 15 CBHE projects.

3.2.4. Entrepreneurs/Employers

Substantial **policy gaps** exist in the HE systems in the Western Balkans, and consequently **substantial reforms and follow-up** are needed to improve their quality and enhance their contribution to economic competitiveness. The improvement of the quality of education has been a key theme in the reform of **HE systems in the Western Balkans** for several years, especially since the introduction of the Bologna reform process.

Most of the Western Balkan **companies** that participate as partners in CBHE projects **are SMEs**. CBHE projects have given them access to experts in specific fields, as well as to research laboratories and specialised equipment. Businesses have benefitted from this partnership to develop new products and to find students for working on new processes and working tools.

HEIs are a rich recruitment ground for businesses, which would like to test potential future staff during internships. In a number of CBHE projects, businesses are part of review panels and participate directly in the curriculum design process.

However, this is not always the case and most curriculum development projects carried out industry surveys to establish the precise needs of the labour market. It is important to note that the labour market includes not only the private sector, but also NGOs and the public sector:

School-to-Work Transition for Higher education students with disabilities in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina (Trans2Work) (561847-EPP-1-2015-1-EL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

'Humanitarna Organizacija' from Bosnia Herzegovina and 'Balkna Distance Education Network' from Serbia are two examples of non-university partners that contributed to the success of the Trans2Work project.

In addition, training courses for practitioners were introduced, sometimes on a fee-paying basis, which contributes to the financial sustainability of the activities:

Reinforcement of the Framework for Experiential Education in Healthcare in Serbia (ReFEEHS) (561644-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Within the ReFEEHS project, training courses in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and nursing were proposed to professionals.

- ▶ Overall 1246 individuals active in the private sector, including NGO and civil servants, were trained inside the 15 CBHE projects.



4. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND NATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

4.1. Regional Cooperation

There is significant potential for internationalisation through intra-regional cooperation. Several important initiatives already exist to foster such cooperation in both teaching and research. The academics in the Western Balkans are eager to seek cooperation with institutions from the same Region. Indeed, when there is a preference for international cooperation, the geographic or cultural closeness (expressed in factors such as language and religion and a tradition of cooperation) tends to prevail.

In certain countries, relations between HEI, before they started their collaboration in the frame of the CBHE projects, were quite competitive. However, after having worked together HEIs often discovered the **hidden benefits** of this collaboration. For example, some HEI realised that **sharing resources**, such as research databases, open learning platforms and scientific laboratories, is cost saving and even feasible for geographically small countries like those in the Western Balkans.

The sharing of resources within the CBHE projects led to greater interaction between professors and more intensive sharing of ideas. Hence, when cooperation went particularly well within a CBHE project, the universities involved decided to set up **joint degrees**:

Curriculum Development joint European Political Science MA (euroPS) (561485-EPP-1-2015-1-AT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

The euroPS project delivered a joint degree curricula for a 'Master in Political Science'. The study programme was delivered through the cooperation of EU and Western Balkan experts, and taught in English. Western Balkan teachers were trained in new and innovative teaching methodologies. Master students were educated in the framework of a multilevel governmental approach taking into account the complexity of politics in a globalised world. Obligatory internships connected the students to the needs of stakeholders for modernisation.

The CBHE action has contributed significantly to the strengthening of the cooperation in the Region. It provides a means by which HEIs can work together on themes of mutual interest across national and ethnic boundaries and it promotes people-to-people contacts, which help to change mentalities and diminish prejudices.

A number of academic subject areas lend themselves to a regional dimension such as agriculture, engineering and environmental studies and proved to be suitable fora for cooperation. In working together, exchanging best practice and benchmarking against each other, each country has learned from its neighbours. The creation of regional budget envelopes further fostered regional cooperation and exchange. In terms of geographical scope, **44 %** of the projects are regional projects involving 11-15 institutions from different countries.

It is also interesting to note that thanks to cross-regional projects there is cooperation with several countries in various other world regions:

Establishing Modern Master-level Studies in Information Systems (Montenegro and Ukraine) (561592-EPP-1-2015-1-FR-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Assisting Better Communication (Georgia, Israel, Bosnia Herzegovina) (573610-EPP-1-2016-1-GE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

4.2. National Education Reforms

Structural projects are of particular importance for triggering and supporting developments and reforms of the national education systems in the Partner Countries. The majority of the Structural projects (**86%**) are therefore single country (**national**) projects.

Analysis has shown that successful CBHE projects sparked national debates and highlighted policy gaps, which led to **policy and legislative reforms**. Since participation of Education Ministries in Structural projects is obligatory, the CBHE action laid the basis for cooperation between HEIs and national authorities:

Institutional framework for development of the third mission of universities in Serbia (IF4TM) (561655-EPP-1-2015-1-RS-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP)

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MEST) in Serbia actively participated in the project with the tangible result of developing and adopting specific documents. For example adapting 'The Law on Higher Education', to developing and adopting the 'Strategy of Scientific and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2020 - Research for Innovations' as well as 'the Guidelines for the development of Technology Transfer and Innovations dimensions of the third mission of HEIs').

Despite success stories **in reforming the national legislation**, the process is not always smooth. Many Ministry officials were not used to this bottom-up approach and limited language skills acted as a barrier, increasing their resistance. In addition, there was often a **lack of awareness and proper follow-up from Ministries**. This became obvious during cluster meetings specifically organised for Structural projects, where Ministry representatives often showed (positive) surprise about the existence of CBHE projects addressing national needs and where the Ministry itself was an official partner in the project consortium.



5. INCLUSIVENESS

5.1. People with Fewer Opportunities

- ▶ Around 46% of the CBHE projects in the Western Balkans include a priority for the involvement of people with fewer opportunities. Projects concentrate mainly on students with disabilities (visual disability, hearing disability, physical disability).

Given the socio-economic difficulties in the Western Balkans, activities aiming at people with disabilities are especially depending on funding mechanisms like the CBHE action:

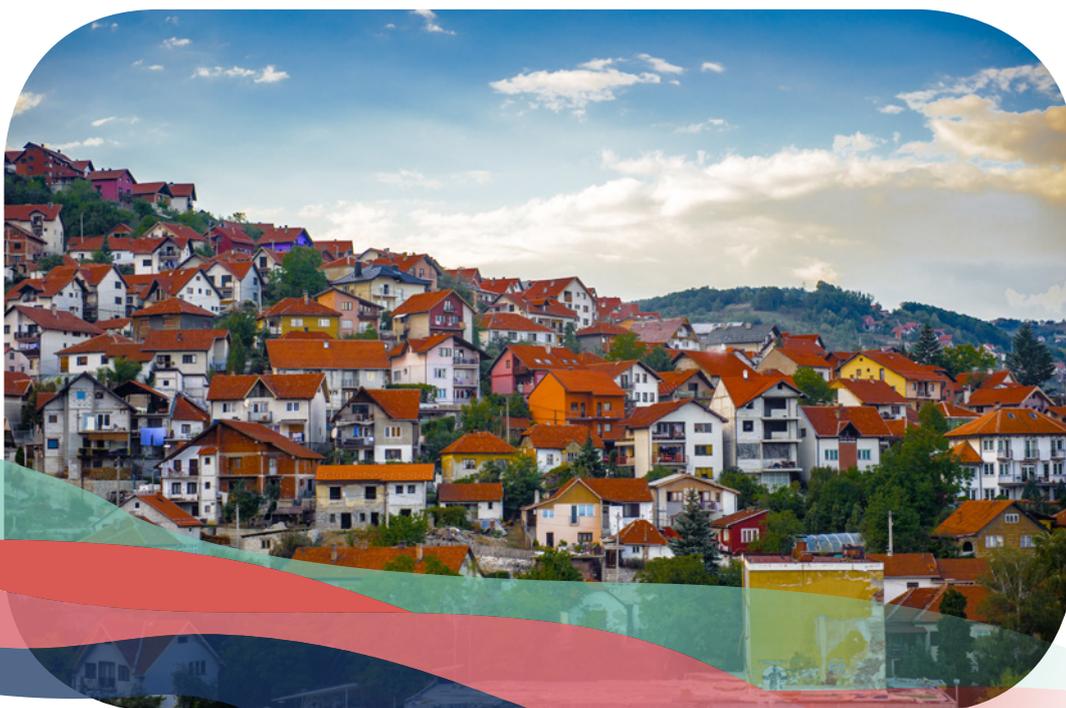
School-to-Work Transition for Higher education students with disabilities in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina (Tras2Work) (561847-EPP-1-2015-1-EL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

In this project, students with disability were the main target of the project. Among other activities, the project managed to organise international internships for 30 students with disabilities and introduced a new model of curriculum that aimed at enhancing inclusiveness.

5.2. Institutions Located in less developed regions

In the Western Balkans, the CBHE action reached HEIs outside the capitals, with participation from HEI located throughout the territory.

Cooperation among HEIs from the same territory is especially important for the Western Balkans, where the trace of the conflicts is still present. Institutions located in the main cities participate more often in consortia but there is no 'geographic monopoly'.



6. CONCLUSIONS

The Western Balkan countries strive to become part of the European Union but sizeable parts of their economies are still insufficiently competitive, the private sector is underdeveloped and there is often too much political interference. None of the Western Balkan countries are considered to be well-functioning market economies and in spite of the progress made and reforms undertaken, many structural problems remain which affect the national labour markets and employment opportunities for younger people (graduates).

A first analysis of a smaller sample of 2015 final project reports has shown that CBHE projects play an important role in the support and the development of the education systems in the Partner Countries. The higher education sector is a driving force for the economy and the society as a whole and the role of the CBHE action is important as it has a long-term structural effect on the countries. A number of best-practice examples show in an impressive way the benefits that CBHE projects can have on educational systems, HEIs and individuals (academics, administrative university staff, and students).

However, the impact of the CBHE action can be further improved by looking at the challenges that were identified via the sample of final project reports and the monitoring activities (desk monitoring, monitoring missions, cluster meetings) conducted by the Agency. Some of the challenges refer to the CBHE action as a whole, others specifically to the Western Balkans.

6.1. Challenges

- The CBHE action has a large number of **recurrent beneficiaries** both institutions and individuals. Long term, this leads to a **lack of innovative and creative project ideas** (and few new collaborations) and diminishes the impact of the CBHE action in the Region.
- **Internationalisation strategies** in HEIs are often absent or insufficiently developed. The creation of project consortia often lack a long-term strategic vision for the development of the HEIs, and proposals are developed because of existing or recurrent collaborations.
- The large maximum grant amount of EUR 1 million sometimes leads to ‘inflated’ project budgets and lowers cost efficiency of project activities. In terms of staff costs, we observed that individuals (professors/consultants) worked on several CBHE projects in parallel, thus incurring high staff costs. This kind of ‘monopolisation’ of projects by individual persons is not desirable and leads to projects that are repetitive in their topics, and sub-optimal project results.
- The participation of **non-academic partners** in CBHE projects is limited and the involvement of private business remains a challenge. Finding mechanisms for the integration of more non-academic partners is vital given their importance for ensuring the relevance of new and updated study programmes for the labour market.
- **Accreditation** is sometimes problematic because it takes a long time and does not allow the running of degree programmes within the eligibility period of the CBHE project. Another challenge is the suppression of accreditation agencies in the Western Balkans for country-specific reasons or the whole accreditation process being on hold due to a blocking legislation procedure.

- **Regional and cross-regional projects** face various administrative and management challenges due to different rules and regulations applicable in different countries. This is particularly true for tendering procedures. On average one third of the CBHE grant is foreseen for the purchase of equipment and complications and delays in the tendering procedures generate important implementation problems for the projects and sometimes equipment will only be available at the very end of the project duration.
- The creation of **key project management documents** for quality assurance, management processes, promotion and disseminations often does not meet expected quality standards (lack of indicators, milestones, responsibilities, and timelines) for a well-managed project.
- **Reaching out beyond the initial partnership** needs to be further developed and should become a key priority for the projects. Intensive dissemination of project outcomes and results during and after the project funding period plays an important role. Excellent results should be better valorised and shared with other HEI working in the same field and facing the same challenges.
- For a number of CBHE projects appropriate **institutional endorsement** by the HEI administration is not or only partially in place. HEIs must invest more in using CBHE projects for strategic development and provide adequate support via international offices and financial departments. Often, a lack of synergies between different CBHE projects (and with other funded Erasmus+ initiatives) within the same institution is observed.
- Proper **involvement of decision makers and national authorities** (especially for Structural Projects) is lacking for many projects. This is concomitant with a lack of commitment of the national authorities to follow-up and incorporate the CBHE projects and results into their national educational strategies.
- There is a lack of **financial autonomy of the HEIs**, for instance in Kosovo and Albania. Without their own funds and separate bank accounts at HEI level, institutions face severe challenges for the financial management and the implementation of international projects. This causes huge administrative burden and delays project activities since the request for funds may require lengthy procedures engaging many hierarchy levels for approval. This jeopardises the sustainability of the project results because the regulations hinder attempts to generate additional income, via consultancy and research services for example.
- Public HEIs are **understaffed at administrative and academic level**, in particular for Kosovo. This can even lead to the withdrawal of the accreditation for study programmes if no qualified academics are available.
- **Students** are not participating in the project conception, design and implementation in the majority of cases. They are mainly integrated at the end of the CBHE project in its testing phase if at all. If the expectations and needs of students or student associations (which could be part of project consortia) are not sufficiently taken into account, this lowers the relevance of their studies for the labour market and the sustainability of the funded degree programmes.
- The **sustainability of project results** is often not sufficiently addressed by the consortia, particularly, in public universities. Conversely, for private universities, the sustainability of project results appears to be more effective as private HEIs have managed to attract students with their new study programmes based on a 'business plan'.

6.2. Recommendations

The analysis of the 2015 and few 2016 CBHE projects together with the challenges identified suggest the following recommendations for changes and improvements:

- The action should focus more on **targeted structural change** in the Partner Countries. The **Structural Projects** should be better integrated and brought in line with the national priorities of Partner Countries for the development of their educational systems. The Western Balkan countries want to become full partners in the European Higher Education Area but need to come **closer to EU standards with their education sectors**. The Ministries of Education play a critical role for the exploitation, upscaling and mainstreaming of CBHE project results and adequate measures should be set up to better link them to the Structural projects. The organisations of project ‘cluster meetings’ in the presence of the Ministries of Education brought some good results but this is still not sufficient to guarantee good value for money for Structural projects.
- More HEIs must adopt a **strategic approach** and focus their participation in the CBHE action on projects that are in line with their medium and long-term priorities and development goals. This ‘strategic interest’ orientation will then lead to better support of the CBHE projects (e.g. by the international office and finance department), the exploitation of synergies between projects implemented at the same HEI and above all to the sustainability of the projects after the end of their funding period.
- The **institutional capacity of Partner Country HEIs** to manage international projects needs to be further developed. Although there is a positive evolution of institutions taking over the coordination of CBHE projects, the Partner Country HEIs need more training and support to develop innovative project ideas, to submit competitive proposals and to ensure high quality in the implementation and management of international projects.
- The **diversity of HEIs** and individuals in the CBHE action needs to increase. The CBHE action focuses on high value projects and this favours experienced (often recurrent) and big HEIs. The ‘entry barriers’ for smaller institutions and newcomers are high. One way to counterbalance this challenge would be to dedicate a share of the budget to smaller projects covering certain types of activities only (i.e. staff training activities, exchange of university professors, update of few modules, summer schools, etc.). However, such an approach is more labour-intensive to manage from EACEA, and would require the introduction of simplified funding modalities (e.g. lump sums) and simplified or external monitoring of project activities.
- The **involvement of some professors in several parallel projects** (as coordinators and/or partners) – and benefiting from generous (top up) funding of salaries – needs to be reviewed as it undermines the quality of project outputs.
- The **involvement of private business and relevant stakeholders** (e.g. Chambers of Commerce, professional associations, etc.) in CBHE projects needs to be increased when the connection to the world of work is important and students need relevant labour market skills. New approaches to ensure a quantitative and qualitative significant participation of companies active in the region should be developed. Mandatory involvement of non-academic partners could be envisaged, where appropriate.

- **Students, and student associations** should take part in CBHE projects (were relevant) from the very beginning. This would enrich project development and implementation and allow a better match between project outcomes and the expectations and interests of the students. This would also contribute to guaranteeing the sustainability of the projects, particularly for curriculum development projects.
- The **inclusion of more young academics** in CBHE projects would provide them with opportunities for continuous professional development and career options, and contribute to the fight against the brain drain.
- **More academics from Programme Countries** should visit the Western Balkan partner HEIs to teach as **guest lecturers** in graduate and post-graduate courses (BA, MAs and Doctoral programmes) within the Curriculum projects. This would improve knowledge transfer, enforce the ties and networks and provide more visibility and credibility vis-à-vis the student body.





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Erasmus+

Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action

Regional Report Western Balkans

Resume

This report is based on the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency's evaluation of the first final project reports of the first generation of CBHE projects selected for funding in 2015. Altogether 138 projects were funded in 2015 and 88 finalised projects have submitted their final reports in 2019, among which 15 were implemented in the Western Balkans.