

## **Poboljšanje kvaliteta obrazovanja kroz unapređenje internacionalizacije i postupka priznavanja kvalifikacija na Univerzitetu "Džemal Bijedić" u Mostaru**

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**SAŽETAK:** U okviru projekta STINT (Jačanje internacionalizacije u visokom obrazovanju BiH) jedan od zadataka je bio da se napravi samoevaluacija na svim javnim Univerzitetima u BiH vezano za internacionalizaciju kako bi se odredili dalji koraci. Kreirane su tri ankete za samoevaluaciju, za studente i nastavno osoblje. Na osnovu rezultata prve dvije ankete urađena je SWOT-analiza internacionalizacije na Univerzitetu "Džemal Bijedić" u Mostaru. Treća anketa se ticala priznavanja kvalifikacija i na osnovu nje je urađena druga SWOT-analiza. Rezultati SWOT-analize o internacionalizaciji su pokazali da postoji razvijena svijest na Univerzitetu o značaju internacionalizacije za poboljšanje kvalitete obrazovanja i istraživanja. Internacionalizacija daje mogućnosti za dugoročna međunarodna partnerstva i umrežavanje. Jedan od problema koji je uočen je pronalaženje studijskih programa u inostranstvu koji odgovaraju studijskim programima na Univerzitetu "Džemal Bijedić" što dodatno utječe na manjak motivacije studenata i nastavnog osoblja za programe mobilnosti. Priznavanje kvalifikacija još uvijek predstavlja problem zbog nedovoljno jasno definisanih zakonskih osnova na kantonal-nom nivou, kao i Statutom Univerziteta. Također, uočeno je i da na području BiH postoji veliki broj vi-sokoškolskih ustavova koji se bave priznavanjem kvalifikacija. Kao zaključak sprovedenih SWOT-analiza možemo navesti da je potrebna centralizacija samog procesa kao i poboljšanje zakonske legislative.

**Ključne riječi:** *internationalizacija, priznavanje kvalifikacija, STINT*

## **Increasing the Quality of Education Through Improvement of Internationalization and Process of the Recognition of Qualifications at the Dzemal Bijedic University of Mostar**

**ABSTRACT:** One of the tasks of the STINT project (Strengthening of Internationalization in B&H Higher Education) was to conduct self-evaluation at all public universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina concerning internationalization in order to determine future actions. Three questionnaires for self-assessment were created both for students and staff members. Using results from the first two questionnaires SWOT analysis for internationalization at the Dzemal Bijedic University was developed. Results from the third questionnaire were used to develop SWOT analysis for recognition of qualifications. SWOT analysis for internationalization showed that there is awareness of importance of internationalization for the improvement of the quality of education and research at the University. Internationalization gives opportunities for long-lasting international collaboration and net-working. One of the problems that we detected were difficulties in finding study programs that match our study programs, which additionally demotivate both students and staff members to participate in mobility programs. Recognition of qualifications is still a problem due to laws at the Cantonal level that are not de-tailed enough. Also, the Statute of the University does not regulate this. A great number of Higher Education Institutions perform recognition of qualification which is detected as one of the threats. From this SWOT analysis we can conclude that there is a need for more centralization in B&H concerning recognition of qualifications and improvement of law legislative.

**Keywords:** *internationalization, recognition of qualifications, STINT*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Internationalization of higher education is often related to the quality of education (van der Wende 1998). It is expected that internationalization will contribute to the quality of education since the exchange of students, professors and researchers will enable mutual learning, comparison of teaching methods, materials used for teaching, synthesis of best

approaches and practices, cross cultural understanding, improvement of language skills,... Firstly quality of education was expected to be improved though impact of foreign students on teaching and learning process, curriculum as well as on the services at the host universities. So most higher education view internationalization as an instrument to improve the overall quality of education at their institution (O'Malley, 2015). We can consider this contribution of

internationalization to the quality of education at individual and institutional level. We don't have enough evidence on the relationship between the internationalization and quality at our univeristy. One of the reasons is that we have not done systematic monitoring or evaluation of internalization. Also, our quality assurance system is still nationally oriented. So even though we consider quality as an important aim of internationalization we lack systematic monitoring. We should not forget that internationalization of higher education may also have more or different aims.

Recognition of qualification is also important component in the internalization and it is precondition for establishment of the European Higher Education Area (Rauhvargers, 2004). Even though Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified Lisbon Convention in 2003 there are still problems with the recognition of foreign qualifications because of the national legislation and national procedures. Other problem are institutional recogniton procedures which are not sufficiently developed.

Having that in mind, we are developing Strategy of internalization which is going to be used in the future in order to follow this.

Strengthening of Internationalisation in B&H Higher Education (STINT) is title of the project founded by EU in order to adress these issues and help HEI in Bosnia and Herzegovina to overcome some of the problems mentioned (STINT project).

**EVALUATION OF THE CURRENT STATE ABOUT INTERNATIONALIZATION AND RECOGNITION MECHANISMS**

In order to get an overall impression of the current state at the University in regards to internationalisation and recognition mechanisms we developed 3 questionnaires for evaluation of internationalisation and recognition mechanisms for all B&H partners in the project. For creation of this questionnaire all relevant European legislation and similar studies are consulted and all main principles are incorporated in the questionnaire. Experience of EU partners has extreme value. Based o the results from these questionnaires, 2 SWOT analysis were developed: Swot analysis for internationalization at the Dzemal Bijedic University of Mostar and SWOT analysis for recognition of qualifications.

SWOT analysis for internationalization was developed to establish the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding internalization at our University. For this analysis we have used surveys about internalization for students (79 students out of 576 or 13,71%) and staff members (20 persons out 29 or 68,96%) as well as our experience from everyday work. Results of this analysis are presented in table 1.

From this SWOT analysis we can conclude that there is awareness of importance of internationalization for the improvement of the quality of education and research at the University. Partnership agreements with other universities enable networking and transfer of knowledge and internationalization of curriculum. As our weaknesses we detected lack of personnel employed at the international office and lack of capacities at the University. Also, internalization is

financed mostly from EU funds so lack of funding was detected as one of our weaknesses. As possible treats we detected the problem of finding corresponding study programs abroad that are like our study programs. This may demotivate students from participating in mobility programs. Other threat is recognition of ECTS credits after mobility.

**Table 1.** Swot analysis for internationalization

	Positive	Negative
Internal environment	<b>Strengths</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness among students and staff members regarding mobility programs</li> <li>- Good promotion of mobility programs</li> <li>- Willingness of the students and staff members to take part in mobility programs</li> <li>- Awareness of the importance of mobility and student/ staff exchange</li> <li>- Awareness of importance of internationalization for the improvement of the quality of education and research at the University</li> <li>- Internalization strategy-work in progress</li> <li>- Partnership agreements with other Universities</li> <li>- Networking</li> <li>- Experience and knowledge transfer</li> <li>- International knowledge in curriculum</li> <li>- Commitment of international relations officers /staff members</li> <li>- Mobility procedures available and transparent</li> </ul>	<b>Weaknesses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivation for mobility is not clear for students</li> <li>- Potential lack of recognition of ECTS credits</li> <li>- There is a language barrier especially for studying in other languages than English</li> <li>- The wider community is not sufficiently informed about internationalization</li> <li>- Internationalization is financed mostly from EU funds</li> <li>- Lack of personnel employed at the international office and lack of capacities at the University</li> <li>- Insufficient knowledge and lack of policies or strategies at cantonal / entity level or the state level that affect directly the internationalization of the University</li> <li>- Lack of visibility</li> </ul>
	<b>Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EU Internationalization Strategy</li> <li>- Possibilities for long-lasting international partnerships/collaboration</li> <li>- Integration of intercultural experiences</li> <li>- International attractiveness of Mostar</li> <li>- International networking</li> <li>- Possibilities for active participation in international research programs</li> <li>- Gaining knowledge about other educational system</li> </ul>	<b>Threats</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of necessary and relevant information about exchange program and study program available at the host institution</li> <li>- Difficult to find study programs with courses that are matching with our study programs</li> <li>- Difficulties with issuing visas, resident permit and other documents</li> <li>- There is a big interest for only small number of countries for mobility</li> <li>- Brain drain</li> <li>- Underfunding</li> <li>- Problems with the recognition of ECTS credits</li> </ul>
External environment		

For SWOT analysis on recognition of qualifications we used survey on Recognition of qualifications of staff members (6 out of 10 or 60%) as well as our experience from everyday work and existing documents regarding the recognition of qualifications at the cantonal and state level. Results are presented in table 2.

**Table 2.** SWOT analysis on recogniton of qualifications

	Positive	Negative
Internal environment	<b>Strengths</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- List of required documents and manner of their submission available (providing advice to the applicant on how to obtain the required documents)</li> <li>- The approximate time needed to process an application determined</li> <li>- Institutional accreditation</li> <li>- Projects dealing with this issues</li> <li>- Good collaboration with CIP (Centre for Information and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education</li> <li>- IT resources</li> <li>- Transparency of procedure</li> </ul>	<b>Weaknesses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inefficient process</li> <li>- Need for more centralization</li> <li>- No office/person at the University that deals with Recognition of qualification</li> <li>- Law on validation and equivalence of educational documents at the Cantonal level is not detailed enough</li> <li>- Recognition procedure is not regulated by the Statute of the University</li> <li>- Academic recognition in the jurisdiction of the Commission of three to five persons formed for individual cases</li> <li>- There is no procedure for recognition of qualifications if the documentation is incomplete</li> <li>- Lack of description of the assessment criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications</li> <li>- It's hard to define what is meant by "substantial differences" during the process of recognition of qualifications</li> </ul>
	<b>Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining knowledge about other educational system</li> <li>- CIP support</li> <li>- Lisbon convention and other relevant documents available</li> </ul>	<b>Threats</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher Education Institutions in other words relevant faculties themselves are responsible for diploma recognition</li> <li>- Higher Educational System in Bosnia and Herzegovina</li> <li>- Great number of Higher Education Institutions that perform recognition of qualifications</li> <li>- Lack of coordination and harmony of local and central legislation regulating this area</li> </ul>
External environment		

Despite the fact that we have list of required documents available and the approximate time needed to process an application is determined, recognition procedure is not regulated by the Statute of the University. At the University there is-no office/person that deals with Recognition of qualification so academic recognition is in the jurisdiction of the Commission of three to five persons formed for individual cases. Another weakness is the fact that Law on validation and equivalence of educational documents at the Cantonal level is not detailed enough. Because of those weaknesses we detected following threats:

1. Higher Education Institutions in other words relevant faculties themselves are responsible for diploma recognition

2. Great number of Higher Education Institutions that perform recognition of qualifications
3. Lack of coordination and harmony of local and central legislation regulating this area.

Fair recognition is now acknowledged to be the cornerstone of the internationalization of higher education and of student mobility. Bosnia and Herzegovina don't have Recognition Manual which should be direct and practical response to the challenges and expectations raised by politicians, policy makers, students, parents and employers. One of the specific aims of the STINT project is development of the Recognition Manual which will ensure that coherent institutional policies on recognition are based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which is UNESCO's and the Council of Europe's legally binding text concerning the recognition of foreign qualifications.

Recent conducted accreditation process of HEIs in B&H addressed internationalization, as well as research, as the biggest problem in B&H. STINT project have as a second aim creation of criteria for assessing of internationalization that will contribute to the orientation of HEIs on the implementation of internationalized strategies and indicators that could point out on international character.

### **INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY**

Government policy plays a key role as it can facilitate or hinder the internationalization of higher education. Countries have taken different approaches to internationalization. On the proposal of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of B&H, the Council of Ministers of B&H adopted a Decision on the Adoption of Priorities for the Development of Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Period 2016-2026 (The Decision was adopted and came into force on 30 March 2016). The decision stipulates that these priorities "represent the main measures and activities that need to be implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina to strengthen the development of higher education on the one hand and, on the other hand, to achieve its full involvement in the European Higher Education Area (paragraph 1 (Prioriteti za razvoj visokog obrazovanja u BiH za period 2016-2026)). The priorities identified will contribute to the further alignment of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the policies, objectives and priorities of the European Higher Education Area (paragraph 3). The question is, however, how well the normative measures and activities will be successfully implemented, that is, create the preconditions for achieving the goals set out in the Decision, and then those set in our Strategy. A wide range of subjects designated to act as participants in the implementation of priorities (responsible educational authorities, ministries of science, rectoral conferences, higher education institutions, higher education institutions in B&H, academia, labor market representatives, student organizations and the Union, labor ministries and employment, local government, finance ministries, public) should guarantee their implementation.

International mobility of teachers and students, joint study programs, international cooperation and institutional partnerships, international short programs and internationalization of the curriculum, as forms of internationalization, contribute to the realization of the

key role of the University in the development of economy, society and individuals. All these elements are expressed and present in our practice so far, but not in a satisfactory and sufficient measure. Their strengthening will contribute to the improvement of the quality of the education system, the high academic standards, the excellence of academic staff and employability of young people in the global labor market and their linguistic and intercultural competencies.

Based on the above, the following strategic objectives of the University in the field of internationalization in the period 2018-2023 have been identified:

1. Implement and strengthen promotional activities aimed to improve the processes of cooperation, mobility and project development,
2. Strengthen and enhance the process of international cooperation and internationalization at the University,
3. Increase the number of applications and participation in international projects,
4. Improve the process of mobility,
5. Improve the recognition process,
6. Improve resources for the implementation of the process of cooperation, mobility and internationalization.

Furthermore, the Strategic Goals have been broken down into measures that will become programs, projects or activities, depending on the complexity of the problem/goal, depending even on goal solving approach.

Identified measures for improvements are:

- I. Intensify the promotion of the activities and inclusion of students and staff of the University to increase and achieve high-quality mobility that will strengthen their competences, knowledge and skills
- II. To increase the incoming student mobility of all three cycles, as well as the incoming teacher/staff mobility, increase the number of courses that are taught in English or another foreign language,
- III. Make more attractive study programs, improve and internationalize curricula, and organize a larger number of international short programs, with more intensive involvement of the student organisations,
- IV. Add a promotional material about Mostar and the University to the University and faculty web sites, and the experiences of incoming students after completing their mobility
- V. To make it easier for outgoing mobility, it is necessary to create and implement institutional programs of activities for internationalization and promotion of mobility, including all stakeholders in these processes
- VI. Encourage greater participation in mobility by formal recognition of competences acquired abroad, attractive mechanisms and the provision of appropriate working conditions for mobile staff.

- VII. To undertake measures for the organization of joint study programs, multilateral summer schools,
- VIII. To balance students' mobility, activities related to the recognition of diplomas and the transfer of credits we should undertake, thereby at the same time achieving some elements of strengthening of the European Higher Education Area
- IX. To systematically encourage ideas, participation and management of international research projects and to involve many staff members, younger researchers, with the division of tasks (ideas, project writing, administration, financial and legal affairs, etc.)
- X. Encourage the participation of researchers in international research projects and evaluate the results achieved
- XI. Create and use a high-quality IT system for monitoring and analysis of realized mobilities, and conducting surveys to determine their quality.

Strategy of internationalization of the Dzemal Bijedic University of Mostar also defines 28 indicators which will enable us to systematic monitor or evaluate internationalization. Awareness of the importance of quality assurance of internationalization strategy and activities is still not present at the governmental level, „bottom up“ approach will be used to evaluate and ensure this quality by the HEIs.

### RECOGNITION MODEL

Bosnia and Herzegovina joined Erasmus + in 2014. Student mobility is the main point of activities in this program at B&H universities. Significant problem are the recognition procedures which aren't in accordance with international documents within EHEA. Bosnia and Herzegovina signed and ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2003, but the legislation concerning recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in Bosnia and Herzegovina hasn't been completely harmonized with the Convention yet neither the recognition procedures at higher education institutions are completely unique and harmonized with the Convention. Without harmonized recognition procedures there isn't student and teachers mobility at appropriate way.

Fair recognition is now acknowledged to be the cornerstone of the internationalisation of higher education and of student mobility. Bosnia and Herzegovina doesn't have Recognition Manual which should be direct and practical response to the challenges and expectations raised by politicians, policy makers, students, parents and employers. The aim of Recognition Manual should be ensuring that coherent institutional policies on recognition are based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which is UNESCO's and the Council of Europe's legally binding text concerning the recognition of foreign qualifications.

Model on Academic Recognition at Public Higher Education Institution was developed in 2016 by the representative of the Center for Information and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in

B&H together with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Srpska and University of Sarajevo. STINT Project was presented at the Fifth Conference of the Ministers of Education of B&H in April 2017 in Sarajevo. One of the conclusions of the Conference was the importance of harmonization of legislation related to recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in B&H with the provision of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary documents. Dzemal Bijedic University of Mostar is using this Model to develop Rulebook on recognition of qualification which will include recognition procedure for the university. Current legislation in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (based on the nostrification and equivalency) could be the obstacle to implement the Model at two universities in this canton (Zakon o nostrifikaciji i ekvivalenciji inostranih obrazovnih isprava, 2005).

### CONCLUSION

With the adoption of new Strategy of internationalization at the Dzemal Bijedic University of Mostar with its 28 different indicators we will be able to systematically monitor and evaluate internationalization in next 5 years, and act upon if needed. By monitoring the quality of the internationalization activities we can be able to assess the contribution of internationalization to the quality of education. It can be argued that internationalization can not contribute to the quality of higher education when the internationalization activities are not of good quality themselves. National quality assurance systems should be internationalised in order to avoid assessment of higher education in the context of only national systems.

Since the higher education institutions are responsible for academic recognition of qualifications for continuation of studies, existence of institutional policies and procedures are of the crucial importance. Focusing on learning outcomes as it is stressed in Lisbon Convention and improved recognition will help increase mobility and internationalisation in institutional and wider context.

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