



Tempus project- 517200-1-2011-1-BE-TEMPUS-SMGR

Establishing and capacity building of the Southern Serbian Academy and the National Conference for Vocational Higher Education (ECBAC)

REPORT ON THE 11th ECBAC TEMPUS CONSORTIUM MEETING HELD IN PIROT (NOVEMBER, 2014)

Eleventh meeting of the ECBAC Tempus project consortium was held on 26th and 27th November, 2014 in Pirot, in the School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers. The meeting was attended by the European partners from Ku Leuven University in Belgium (Andre Govaert and Geert De Lepeleer), University in Alen in Germany (Nichola Adams) and IPP Porto University in Portugal (Monica Vieira).

Partners from Serbia who attended the meeting are the following: the School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers in Kruševac (Zoran Vasić and Ivan Tomić), School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers in Pirot in Pirot (Sanja Kovačević, Danijela Vidanović, Marina Milanović, Mirjana Stanković - orević, Emilija Popović and Aleksandar Spasić), College of Agriculture and Food Technology in Prokuplje (Saša Petrović, Nikola Stolić and Ivica Stanić), College of Textile in Leskovac in Leskovac (Suzana - orević, - ore Miltenović and Miodrag - orević), the School of Higher Chemical Technology in Kruševac (Dragan Nikolić), High Medical School of Professional Studies in - uprija (Milan Sretenović, Anti - Dragan, Tatjana Simović and Nikola Krstić), The School of Higher Technical Professional Education in Niš (Dejan Blagojević, Aleksandra Borić, Radomir Cekić, Irina Cenić, Danica Milošević and Jelena Petković), the School of Higher Applied Professional Education in Vranje (Damjan Stanojević), a representative of the Business Technical College of Vocational Studies in Užice and the representative of the Student Conference of Academy of Professional studies (Nebojša Andrijević). The representatives of the Ministry of Education, the National Tempus office, the Regional chamber of Economy in Niš, Health Center in - uprija, as well as the representatives of the schools from Belgrade and Subotica did not attend the meeting.

After a short welcome speech of PhD. Danijela Vidanović who is the director of the College in Pirot, and a short speech of the representative of the Pirot county chief, the project coordinator Mr. Geert De Lepeleer officially opened the meeting.

PhD professor Mr. Andre Govaert pointed out to the minor changes in the order of the agenda items, which was followed by a quick revision of the main conclusions from the previous meeting held in Kruševac, in May 2014 and a unanimous approval of the last meeting report.

Then, the project coordinator drew attention to the changes in the project work plan within certain work packages and reminded the partners which project activities had been finished and which still would need to be implemented.

Within the next item of the agenda, director of the College in Niš, PhD professor Dejan Blagojevi presented a concrete proposal for the legal framework needed to establish the Academy. In order for the Academy to be established, the legal pre-condition which requires the Academy to realize at least 5 accredited study programmes from at least 2 scientific fields must be fulfilled. Eight vocational colleges that are partners on this ECBAC Tempus project satisfy this pre-condition since they together realize around 30 study programmes from 4 scientific fields. Since the legal status of the vocational colleges within the Academy has not been precisely defined by the Law, and this is the key issue in the integration process, a proposal has been made to perform integration in a different way from the one which has been originally planned (which implied the integration of all the eight vocational colleges in the Academy). The new proposal is somewhat different. Namely, College in Prokuplje and College in Leskovac each have at this moment 5 accredited study programmes from 2 scientific fields, which means that they already fulfil the condition to outgrow into an Academy. The proposal is that one of these colleges, no matter which one, requests from the Ministry of education the status of the Academy. Other vocational colleges would perform integrative functions with the Academy through the four services that would be established at the Academy, and these are the IT service, Student service, Office for international cooperation and the Service for quality assurance. This would be achieved by signing special cooperation agreements between the Academy and the vocational colleges. Certainly, one of the important aspects of this kind of integration would be the introduction of joint study programmes (inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary studies), in which situation two vocational colleges would sign an agreement on a joint study programme clearly defining which part of the education process would be performed at which of these two institutions. This proposal, that is the model of the Academy is an alternative solution in case the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development decides not to provide support for the primary model which implies the integration of all the eight colleges in the Academy.

The current obstacle for establishing the Academy of vocational studies lies in the fact that the standards for accreditation of the Academy do not exist at the present moment. Although at first it was believed that it would be possible to use the accreditation standards applied for accreditation of the University to accreditate the Academy, the Ministry responded that it would be necessary to define a new set of standards which would be used solely for the Academy. ECBAC consortium has devised a list of standards and it is planned to submit this list as a proposal to the Ministry of Education.

In the end of his presentation, Professor Blagojevi emphasized that much effort was made to define the legal framework which would enable prompt establishing of the Academy. Representatives of the College in Niš had meetings with the representatives of the Ministry (June, September, November), Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance, National Tempus office and the representatives of the local political structures to discuss the issue of establishing the first Academy of vocational studies in Serbia and accelerate the implementation of the process.

After this presentation, meeting participants were divided in three work groups to define the key aims of the Academy. The first work group consisted of the teaching and non-teaching staff members, the second group comprised the secretaries of vocational colleges and the third one was formed by the college directors. After the discussion, each group presented its work results.

First and foremost, the Academy is going to be formed for the needs of students and for the sake of improving the quality of education. That is why one of the most significant functions of the Academy is to enable better studying conditions to students through the operation of its student service. The first work group listed that the other important aims of the Academy are to make vocational studies recognizable and the students more visible at the market field, to establish strong connections and cooperation with the National Employment Service, to harmonize the study programmes and make efforts that the student programmes are in line with the current needs of the work field and the current European education standards, to insist on introducing greater percentage of practical classes in curriculum, to create conditions for introduction and realization of joint study programmes, to enable exchange of the teaching staff and improve international cooperation, to have a broad range of activities in order to be

able to provide services even to third parties, to launch publishing of scientific journals and create conditions for international conferences to take place, of course working all the time on quality improvement.

An important role of the Academy is also in providing support to the Student Parliament of the Academy in order to attract as many students as possible to get involved in the operation of the Student Parliament so that the students could participate in various outdoor activities, such as, for instance, various cultural and sport events for students.

Through the Student Parliament of the Academy it is possible to work on the development of the students' entrepreneurship spirit, cooperation and motivation for further advancement in their profession. Academy as an umbrella institution which would represent vocational colleges in its composition would be more visible to the officials in higher education of Serbia as well as to those in the European area of education, thus making it possible for vocational colleges to apply much easier for various international projects which were not accessible to them before when they were individual institutions.

Second work group consisting of the vocational college secretaries declared that the main aim of the Academy is the realization of student interests. Then, the group stressed that the Academy should be working on the improvement of the quality standards and the development of international cooperation. In order to realize its functions and its aims, the Academy must have its bodies, that is its President, the Council, the Senate and the Student Parliament of the Academy. At this particular moment, it would be necessary to prepare the founding act for the Academy, appoint the persons in charge, bring the Statute of the Academy and make a feasibility study in order to submit these documents as a proposal to the Ministry of Education, science and Technological Development. For the time being, it is possible to use the already existing resources of the student administrations and the accounting offices in order to reduce the costs of establishing the Academy and setting it in motion, which requires additional administrative costs as well as the overhead costs. In the future, the Academy should make its own income from providing services to third parties, from various donations, sponsorships, gifts and thus create its own financial fund.

The third work group encompassing the directors of vocational colleges made the following conclusions related to the establishing of the Academy. The Academy would raise the criteria for employment and qualifications of the teaching staff. Besides, the Academy would have to give its full support to the processes of quality management, international cooperation development, professional improvement and advancement of the teaching staff, and the participation in projects which are improving the studying conditions of students. Academy should take a unique attitude towards the officials, the market field, the National Employment Service and work on improving the image of vocational colleges in society by strengthening their position in the local community.

After the presentations of the work groups, presentations of the activities done within the action plans of the four services (international cooperation, quality assurance, ICT service and student service) were to follow.

The team for quality assurance achieved a great number of significant results in the previous period. Namely, after four internal meetings which took place in Niš during the months of February and March in 2014, the team brought three questionnaires and two rulebooks which were harmonized at the consortium level. The questionnaires are already in use at partner vocational colleges because they have already been approved by the Teaching councils. The team brought unique *Questionnaire for freshmen*, *Questionnaire for Students* and *Questionnaire for students who have finished the studies*. Each of these questionnaires is anonymous for students and contains clear instructions on how it should be completed. As far as rulebooks are concerned, so far two crucial rulebooks have been prepared, and these are the *Rulebook on Student Evaluation of the Quality of Studies* and the *Rulebook on Standards and the Procedure for Quality Assurance*. Professor or e Miltenovi From the College for Textile in Leskovac, as a member of the team for quality assurance mentioned that his college had already conducted the

analysis of the evaluation results which were obtained by applying new questionnaires and informed the participants that these results were observed at the level of the college in order to work further on the improvement of quality at their college. The reports of the Board for Quality Control have been officially posted on the website of their college.

On behalf of the team for international cooperation, a report was given by PhD professor Aleksandra Borić from the College in Niš. The team for international cooperation has completed a great number of activities so far. Working as a team, the IRO staff brought a *Rulebook on international mobility of students and the teaching staff and the transfer of ECTS points*, then they gave a proposal for the Letter of Intentions that should be sent to all the potential partners at international higher education institutions who are interested in international cooperation, they have been the only team which has defined key performance indicators for their service, they have worked on the project dissemination and trained its team members for new Erasmus+ projects (such as the ones that deal with capacity building in higher education and the ones which refer to international credit mobility that enables both student and teacher mobility).

Professor Borić has shortly stated what the conditions and the deadlines are for applying for the new Erasmus+ projects. Once again it was emphasized that each college must have its PIC number in order to be able to apply for the said projects. The guide for application for the Erasmus+ projects can be found at the following website: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index_en.htm.

The team for international cooperation has a plan to bring a Rulebook on the Criteria for teacher and student mobility at the level of the Academy, in order to be able to perform the selection of teachers and students who will take part in the mobility programmes based on these criteria.

Work of the ICT team was presented by the colleague Sanja Kovačević from the College in Pirot since the colleague Mladen Nikolić who is the coordinator of this team was absent. The main aim of the ICT service was to create a unique information system which would contribute to the improvement of the quality of the teaching process. The team managed to do that by creating a unique software which would be used in the student service and in the service for quality assurance. This easy-to-use software which offers a whole set of useful functions that can make work easier for the services, is made first and foremost to be of great assistance to students and their professors. Using this software, students can apply for their exams, inform themselves about the pre-exam activities and the exam results. Moreover, this software enables students to pay exam fees or tuition fees to the student offices, but at the same time keeps records on students who are late with their payments. Professors can use this platform to post different notices for students, announce exam results, keep records on student attendance in lectures and practical classes and have an insight in the evaluation results since this system can collect and monitor the data referring to the quality control. This software has the capacity to store variety of data in one place, enable easy access to the data and perform automatic data processing, taking care of data safety all the time. All the data can be available not only to the student service, students and the professors but also to the Body for quality control and the Ministry of Education when needed. It has been emphasized that such software which serves for communication, storing of data, statistical data analysis and administration can be further upgraded, which is also one of its advantages. The only disadvantage of the system is that it does not provide a learning environment at the moment for e-learning or distance learning. Currently, all the student services of the eight vocational colleges are using this software during a trial period in order to get acquainted with the software and its possibilities.

Milan Sretenović from the College in Čuprija was in charge of the presentation for the student service. In order to form a student service similar to those that exist in Europe, it is required to invest a lot of finances. That is the reason why this team could not have achieved many concrete results so far. Student service should be financed partially from the budget of the Academy and partially from its own incomes. Unlike the student offices which mainly deal with the student administration, the student service would have to do many other activities. Namely, the student service should deal with the issues of nutrition and accommodation of students, student transport, student credits and scholarships, provide counselling, enable students to work with tutors, help students with disabilities, organize humanitarian

and voluntary activities for students, etc. A lot has been done to promote the concept of the student service to the students, members of the teaching and non-teaching staff, but the aim is to involve as many students as possible in the work of the student service, as well as to inform the wider public, especially the potential stakeholders about the role and the activities of the student service.

During the first day of the meeting, a special agreement on cooperation was made among the eight vocational colleges (from Niš, Pirot, uprija, Leskovac, Prokupje, Vranje, and two from Kruševac) that are partners on this ECBAC Tempus project. Namely, by this agreement, the said vocational colleges express their readiness and consent to integrate institutionally and organizationally into the Academy of vocational studies. Since it is not possible to accreditate the Academy without the standards for accreditation, vocational colleges have agreed to submit a set of accreditation standards that the consortium has already established during the project implementation to the Commission for Accreditation.

Upon the Founding act, the Academy would get a status of an independent higher education institution which would have its full autonomy in realization of various integrative functions, such as strategic planning, introduction of new study programmes, quality assurance and control, election of teachers, issuing of diplomas and diploma supplements, student enrollment policy, international cooperation, investment planning, employment and engagement of teachers and the development of a unique information system. Colleges that are members of the Academy as independent higher education institutions which have the status of a legal entity will keep their autonomy in bringing the Statute and other general acts, election and removal of directors, election of the Council members, forming of expert bodies, disposal of personal income, decisions on issues of great interest for the realization of the teaching process, scientific, artistic and research work and active proposals and participation in the decision-making processes about all the integrative functions of the Academy.

The Academy of vocational studies will realize basic vocational studies on the first level of education and specialist that is master vocational studies on the second level of education. Bodies of the Academy are: the President of the Academy who is elected among the directors of vocational colleges for a three year mandate, the Council of the Academy which is the governing body and comprises 22 members in total (16 representatives of the Academy members, 3 students and 3 representatives of the founder appointed by the Government), the Senate of the Academy which is the expert organ (consisting of the members of the Academy, directors of vocational colleges and the President of the Academy) and the Student Parliament of the Academy which is the organ for the students of the Academy to which each member college delegates two representatives. The Academy will be financed from the budget of the founder and the personal income, gifts, donations and sponsorships. By applying this model of intergration, functionality is improved, autonomy is kept and public responsibility of colleges of vocational studies is increased. The draft of this agreement was presented during the second day of the meeting.

Before signing it and submitting it to the Ministry of Education, this draft needs to undergo some corrections. Suggestions of the project coordinator and the European partners are the following: 1. one of the basic and most fundamental integrative functions of the Academy which has not been stated in the text is forming of the student service at the level of Academy since the primary goal of the Academy should be to fight for the student interests. For this reason, it is necessary to mention in the text the added values that the Academy could bring to the students; 2. the practice at the Academies of vocational studies abroad is to introduce three representatives of the market field as the members to the Academy Council; these members are not voted as all the other members but are actually appointed among the significant strategic partners; we could expand the Council of the Academy according to this model (we could even appoint 4 representatives of the work field since we have four different scientific fields at the level of the Academy); 3. information on the activities and the functions of the Student Parliament of the Academy should be given in more detail; 4. decision on the issues of great importance for the realization of the teaching process, scientific, artistic and research work should be part of the common strategy, not an issue in the domain of the autonomy of each individual vocational college and for that reason it should be

moved in that part of the text on the integrative functions of the Academy (with a remark that the organization of the teaching process could still remain in the domain of individual autonomy); 5. project coordinator drew attention to a contradiction in the text where it is said that the election of teachers in an autonomous function of the Academy on the one hand, and that on the other hand the decision making on the teaching process is in the domain of the autonomous activities of the colleges; the Academy should actually decide upon the election of teachers whereas research work should not be in the domain of the individual colleges' autonomy but one of the integrative functions at the level of the Academy(it would be useful to define which aspects of research activity are common and which are not); 6. this cooperation agreement should be followed by the founding act and the Statute of the Academy; 7. the text of the agreement should contain a sentence which would be attractive to the Government and the Ministry of Education so that we could convince them that we need their support in the process of establishing the Academy of vocational studies and our further development; 8. a suggestion is to organize the first meetings of the Council, Senate, and the Student Parliament of the Academy before the next consortium meeting and to submit the reports from these meetings.

Since the project equipment has still not been purchased, it was necessary to go through the procedure for procurement of the equipment once again. In order for the tendering procedure to be entirely conducted according to the law, vocational colleges need to announce a unique tender which would be public and transparent. Then it is necessary to select the supplier offering the most affordable bid, after which each vocational college should sign a contract with the supplier on its own and pay for its own share of the equipment. The precondition for entering this tendering procedure is that each college has a sufficient amount of financial resources on its Tempus account to purchase the desired equipment. Since the College in Niš has already had some experience in tendering procedures on other projects, it would take responsibility for conducting this tendering procedure as well. A special Commission consisting of the representatives of each partner college on the project would be formed to monitor the regularity of tendering procedure. However, before that, we need to submit the final list of the equipment to the project coordinator.

Project coordinator Mr. Geert de Lepeleer drew the attention to the changes in the project administration that were introduced by the Executive Agency. This implies that certain project costs need additional supporting documents in order to be considered eligible. In particular, this refers to the staff costs. Apart from the special contracts that are signed by the persons engaged on this project (Staff Conventions), it would be needed to submit a copy of an employment contract from the employing institution (or a specially signed declaration), a proof that the staff cost has been paid to an individual (a copy of the bank transfer) and a proof that the payment which is received does not exceed the usual amount that is defined by the policy of the employer. All the project partners do have these documents in their administrative offices, it would be needed just to prepare these documents, collect them and submit them to the project coordinator upon specified deadline.

Within the next item on the agenda, each vocational college presented the activities that were carried out to disseminate the project. Many of the colleges organized round tables for their teaching and non-teaching staff, students and the representatives of the work field in view of informing them about the ECBAC Tempus project results. Also, a website of the project has been made which is maintained and uploaded on regular basis and a Facebook page for the project has been opened recently. College in Niš launched the ECBAC radio to inform not only the students and the staff members but also the wider public about the project goals and results. In order to have a clear overview of the dissemination activities done on the project, professor Andre Govaert gave a suggestion that each college should keep records of its dissemination activities in the future within a special e-template that was made by the College from Kruševac and adopted on one of the previous meetings as a model that should be applied by each and every college.

Then the organization of the four student fairs was planned. These student fairs would be organized in uprija (February), Užice (March), Niš (April) and Belgrade (May) in duration of one day. The student fair in Nis will be organized together with the regional dissemination conference (27th -30th

April), while the student fair in Belgrade will be organized together with the national dissemination conference. It has been agreed that the first fair would be devoted to health protection and medical science. The main organizer of all the student fairs would be the School of Higher Professional Education for Preschool Teachers in Kruševac, but other partners would give their contribution to the organization as well.

In the period to come, three student visits to the European partners are planned in duration of 5 working days. It has been agreed that 12 students in total would take part in this training programme. Each vocational college will send one student representative (11 colleges in total) and one student will represent the Student Conference. The representative of the Student Conference would need to get a special permission from the project coordinator to participate in this training programme no later than the beginning of January, 2015. The aim of the training is to get our students acquainted with the work of the student organizations abroad so that they could apply this example of good practice when forming the Student Parliament at the level of the Academy. The recommendation of the project coordinator is that for these trainings each college should delegate second year students who are proficient in English. Each college does not have to delegate the same student each time, for each training. The first training should take place from 9th to 13th February, 2015 in Gent/Belgium, the second training is planned for the period from 9th to 13th March in Porto/Portugal and the last training is organized in Aalen/Germany from 23rd to 27th March, 2015.

Also it was planned that 5 directors of vocational colleges would go to visit VLHORA in its Brussels offices during the last week of March, in 2015.

12th consortium meeting will be held during the last week of February at High Medical School of Professional Studies in uprija.

Immediately after the meeting in Pirot, the project coordinator Geert De Lepeleer had a meeting with a representative of the Ministry of Education, Zorana Lužanin and Mr. Dejan Blagojević at The School of Higher Technical Professional Education in Niš. During this meeting, the representative of the Ministry said that we could expect the support from the Ministry as a pilot project, since this would be the first Academy of vocational studies to be founded in Serbia. As a consortium we need to submit our model of the Academy (cooperation agreement) as soon as possible to the Ministry as well as to submit a proof that our project is financed by the European Commission. It is possible that we could get a permission for work from the Ministry during a probation period of one year; however, during this time we could not expect the financial support of the Ministry. Currently, the attitude of the Ministry is such that it is not possible to finance opening of any new working positions in education, although a need for new employments would arise by establishing the four services at the level of Academy. If the quality of work at the Academy proves to be of high quality according to the criteria of the Ministry after the expiration of the probation period, we could expect the full support of the Ministry in the future work of the Academy. (We need to remind ourselves here that the Ministry is indeed one of the partners on the ECBAC Tempus project.) Next step is to define as precisely and as clearly as possible the key performance indicators for the Academy, and especially the ones which refer to the issue of quality and financing, so that these indicators could be measured and monitored through the work of the Academy. Whether the Academy continues with its work or not will depend on the evaluation results of the key performance indicators after a probation period of one year. For that reason we as a consortium must carefully approach the definition of KPIs.

Conclusions of the meeting:

1. It has been agreed that four student fairs will be organized respectively in uprija (February), Užice (March), Niš (27th-30th April) together with the regional dissemination conference and Belgrade (May) when national dissemination conference will also take place.

2. Three student visits to the partners in Gent, Porto and Aalen are also planned. Twelve students in total would attend the training programmes first in Belgium from 9th to 13th February, then in Portugal from 9th to 13th March and finally in Germany from 23rd to 27th March.
3. Five directors of vocational colleges are going to visit VLHORA conference in Brussels during the last week in March, 2015.
4. It is necessary to make corrections in the draft of the cooperation agreement between the eight vocational colleges as soon as possible in order to submit the agreement to the Ministry of Education and then define the key performance indicators for the Academy.
5. It is necessary to submit the final list of equipment to the project coordinator.
6. Next ECBAC Tempus consortium meeting will be held in the last week of February, 2015 at the High Medical School of Professional Studies in uprija.

On behalf of the consortium members, the minutes taken by:

Danica Milošević
ECBAC Tempus project
secretary

In Niš,

30th November, 2014