



Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: "Time to End Higher Education Chaos"

“Time to End Higher Education Chaos”

A large number of readers will be painfully familiar with the shortcomings of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Just last week nearly 300 graduates from two private faculties in Republika Srpska had their degrees annulled because the Education Ministry concluded that the process of academic assessment at the faculties was flawed. This is just one among many instances where students have been penalised because of institutional failures.

The authorities of Republika Srpska acted decisively in this instance, but the situation arose because chaos reigns in higher education throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, even after students have endured the mismanagement and institutional chaos that are endemic in the university system to earn a degree, they have to put up with the ultimate affront – their qualifications are not recognised outside Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is because the authorities here have failed to meet their international obligations in respect to the accreditation and validation of academic qualifications.

The good news is that a way out of this mess has been charted and can be followed very quickly. If this is done, the higher education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be brought into the European mainstream and this country's students can start to receive the quality of education they deserve.

During the past four years, educationalists from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with international experts working under the aegis of the Education Ministries and the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Office of the High Representative, drew up a series of drafts of higher education legislation designed to pave the way for recognition of academic qualifications from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the rest of Europe and make it possible for students to complete part of their studies at foreign universities – something that is the norm elsewhere on the continent.

The new legislation was also to provide for the integration of faculties in the universities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina – replacing the current system where faculties are a law unto themselves, administering degrees and study courses in ways that are neither transparent nor accountable. And the legislation was to be an important step towards Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfilling its obligations under the Lisbon Convention (which it signed in 2003), the Bologna Process (which it joined in the same year), and the European Partnership, the broad reform agenda designed to prepare the country for eventual EU membership.

Clearly, then, the state-level Higher Education Law is extremely important for Bosnia and Herzegovina. While it will not on its own solve the problems of the university sector, it represents a huge step towards rehabilitating tertiary education in this country, especially when coupled with related reforms aimed at placing universities on a sound financial footing and establishing codes of ethics and improved standards of democracy, autonomy, governance and management.

It is therefore no surprise that the Law enjoys widespread support throughout the country. The current draft legislation was completed at the end of 2005, but was pushed off the parliamentary agenda last year because of electoral issues that are infinitely less important to the future of this country than the education of its young people.

Members of Bosnia and Herzegovina's new Parliamentary Assembly now have a real opportunity to enact a reform that will benefit everyone in the country; they can do this by debating the Higher Education Law and enacting it without delay.

This May in London, education ministers from throughout Europe (including the ministers from Bosnia and Herzegovina) will participate in a meeting to assess how well or how badly countries are fulfilling their obligations under the Bologna Process. At the last conference, in Bergen in 2005, Bosnia and Herzegovina was judged to be the country that had done least to meet its obligations.

This is a national embarrassment. However, the real scandal, rather than simply failing to meet international requirements, is in treating undergraduates – the very people who must play a leading role in building Bosnia and Herzegovina's future – like second-class citizens. Enacting the state-level Higher Education Law will help end this scandal and represents a first step towards bringing higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina into the 21st century.

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