

# Regional conference: Introduction and implementation of standards – based education in SEE – models and challenges

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## General Report

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Centre for Education Policy, acting as the ERI SEE Interim Secretariat, organised a regional conference entitled “Introduction and implementation of standards-based education in SEE – models and challenges” in December 11-12, 2012.

The conference was attended by approx. 80 participants from all ERI SEE member countries. A particular feature of the conference was the diverse background of participants, since it included policy makers, research community, teachers and school principals, representatives from the state institutions dealing with standards in education as well as the representatives from universities. The conference was also attended by the representatives of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture, Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, KulturKontakt Austria, GIZ and Tempus offices in Serbia.

The main objectives of the conference were:

- to exchange the information on models of standards-based education in pre-tertiary education in SEE;
- to facilitate peer-learning in SEE on good practices in the implementation of standards-based education and introduction of the state matura;
- to discuss the policy approaches for addressing effects of standards-based education to higher education policy and teacher training policies.

Throughout South East Europe, as well as in Europe in general, a trend of introducing and implementing standards-based education across all levels and types of education has been evident. Introduction of standards-based education takes on a number of different forms. These range from introduction of standards for curricula, text books, teachers, schools, but also include the implementation of standardised *matura* exams, quality external evaluation and quality assurance systems for education institutions, as well as the national qualifications frameworks.

Introduction of standards has numerous implications for the education systems – it affects both the content and the way teaching is performed and it creates additional bureaucracy and structures

responsible for evaluation and control of whether and how the standards are implemented. Considering that the introduction of standards has long-term implications for the education system, participants at the conference pointed out that it is essential to understand the system and its context before introducing standards-based education. To ensure in-depth knowledge of the education system, its effects on individuals and society, communication between practitioners, policy and decision makers, as well as the scientific community in developing standards-based education, it is essential to develop a system which leads to quality enhancements and limits unintended effects to a minimum.

Introduction of standards-based education is, on one hand, justified by claims that the introduction of standards will enhance or guarantee quality and, on the other hand, it will lead to greater responsibility and accountability of public education institutions.

However, the introduction of standards-based education raises the question of what is considered quality in and of education, as pointed out by numerous participants of the conference. What is defined as a standard and what the standard is based on; what is considered the key quality of the system; what the education has to deliver; what will the standards measure? Therefore, the process of introducing standards of education inevitably begins with the question of what is quality. The national presentations showed one of the key challenges in defining standards in education in the region which was indeed the question of what is considered quality education.

Examining the existing literature on quality suggests that quality is one of those concepts that do not have one common definition. When the concept of quality is attached to a complex system as education is, the quest for defining quality becomes even more difficult. Relying on different authors who have attempted to define quality of education, a few categories of approaches to quality can be outlined:

- Quality as special or unique.  
Traditionally quality is equalled to exceptionality, excellence.
- Quality as goal-compliance.  
Quality is seen fit for purpose. Quality is defined through the extent set for the goals to be achieved.
- Quality as threshold.  
Specific standards and norms, often minimum standards, are defined that all institutions need to meet.
- Quality as enhancement.  
This viewpoint focuses on continuous development and raise of quality.
- Quality as value for money.  
This approach relies on drawing strong bonds between the quality of education and education spending. It is often reflected in the discussions on the efficiency of education systems.

All of the above approaches to quality are present in the current political debates across Europe, as well as in the region. One of the key discussions indeed relies on the question how to reconcile different approaches to quality when setting up the standards-based education system.

As the country presentations showed when defining standards, the question of setting standards which, on one hand, will lead to enhancement of education system and, on the other, will ensure public responsibility through setting minimum standards, was at the heart of the process of defining standards. Should the standards be defined so that they mirror the education system at the moment and act as minimum standards or should they be defined so that they present a challenge for the education system and require action, investment and change to lead to enhanced education system? One of the innovative solutions presented at the conference was the example of an agency which, on one hand, set the minimum standards needed to be implemented immediately, but at the same time, offers set of standards which require enhancement. However, these need to be fulfilled over a longer period of time.

As stated earlier, the standards-based education is presumed to lead to ensuring public responsibility by the introduction of minimum quality standards and a system of control checking if the minimum standards are met. However, at the same time, it is seen as a way to enhance quality by “setting a bar higher” and introducing the process of quality assurance and evaluation. The participants at the conference agreed that the region can benefit from the introduction of standards-based education as it leads to reinstating trust and transparency into the education system.

However, at the same time, the participants raised the question of whether the standards lead to a rigid education system, which may discourage innovation and creativity, while innovation and creativity are high on political agendas as competences needed to be developed through education in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Another concern raised was with regards to flexibility needed to adjust to diversity and individual needs of learners. As some of the participants noted, this is particularly relevant concern for education systems which aim at widening access to education system for non-traditional learners.

Some of the participants pointed out that some European countries are, after an intense process of standardisation, undergoing a process of de-standardisation. An interesting debate led to a conclusion that what the region may need is the implementation of the standards-based education system which will ensure that the system regains public trust and is accountable to the public, that minimum standards are met and incentives are put in place to lead to quality enhancement. However, this will be the first step in an evolutionary process which will at a later stage lead to reducing the standards-based education, enabling more autonomy and flexibility to ensure that creativity and innovation are fostered by as well as within the education system.