

Western Serbia Academy of Applied Studies

ERASMUS POLICY STATEMENT

Western Serbia Academy of Applied Studies (WSAAS) is a higher education institution established in 2019 by merging two large independent institutions, both with over 40 years' long education tradition – Užice College of Applied Sciences and Valjevo Business School of Applied Studies. The newly founded Academy joined all the existing capacities of these institutions, thus becoming a major vocational higher education institution in the regional higher education system. In addition to Serbian students, due to its geographic position, a large number of students from Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro gravitate towards the WSAAS.

The WSAAS course catalogue reflects current labour market needs, encompassing undergraduate and master's degree study programmes in three fields of science: Engineering and Technology (Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Interior Architecture, Information Technology, Technological Engineering); Social Sciences and Humanities (Tourism, Management, Accounting and Audit, Business Informatics, Business Economics); and Medicine and Health Sciences (Healthcare).

The WSAAS provides students with labour market-relevant skills, in a lifelong learning continuum approach, combining initial vocational qualifications offers with those of continuing training for upskilling and reskilling.

The WSAAS is an innovative and internationally oriented institution. It provides a vibrant and stimulating learning environment that prepares students for living and working in a rapidly changing global workplace. The Academy offers attractive study programmes, small class sizes and hands-on training. Its students benefit from the academic staff's knowledge, gained through their engagement in education, research, enterprises and professional practice. The academic staff comprise distinguished scientists, experts in their profession, authors of numerous publications, deservedly renowned and respected both in Serbia and abroad.

The Internationalisation Strategy of the WSAAS is a comprehensive and long-term strategy, which sets priorities and goals for all aspects of quality education. It aims at raising the quality of the study programmes, mobility of students, teaching and non-teaching staff, and supports training and participation in international projects as a means of continuous quality improvement.

The Internationalisation Strategy focuses on international cooperation and mobility as they guide institutional actions in teaching, research and outreach to the global community.

The WSAAS establishes and develops partnerships with higher education institutions from the EU, but it is equally open to cooperation with institutions in other parts of the world. In choosing partners for cooperation, mobility and other strategic activities, the WSAAS is guided by four main criteria: compatibility of study programmes, commitment to quality education, mobility and project development; a long-term view of the projects to be developed; the principles of mutual benefit.

The right choice of partners is important for allowing both students and teaching/non-teaching staff to gain new experience and knowledge in a modern higher education environment. The establishment of partnerships with the institutions recognizable by the results in the area of education, development, innovation and research, allows the transfer of

good practices and experience. Thus the WSAAS may benefit in terms of the institutional organization, modern curricula design, open approach to the economy and society, teaching process development and improvement, as well as in terms of developing the capacities of its teaching, non-teaching staff, and the students alike.

Taking into consideration various social, economic and geographical aspects from the standpoint of partnership, the WSAAS strategy puts special focus on the putative partners from:

- the Western Balkans territory - higher education institutions that belong to the geographical region defined by a common stage of economic and technological development, similar education systems, as well as a great cultural proximity and minimal language barriers;
- the European Union - higher education institutions that function in well-developed systems, representative of clear indicators and results in respect to the transfer of knowledge and technologies to the labour market, as well as high degree of employability, successful design and implementation of short-cycle programmes, innovative approaches, and permanent quality improvement policy;
- Northern Africa and Turkey - higher education institutions from countries characterized by educational systems that function as a synergy of traditional education, typical for the second half of the last century, and transparent engineering methodologies and approaches to problem-solving tasks, accompanied by the implementation of modern concepts of the Bologna Process.

As a legal successor of Užice College of Applied Sciences and Valjevo Business School of Applied Studies, the WSAAS shall continue to foster the international cooperation established as a result of previous partnerships in Tempus, Erasmus, CEEPUS and other transnational projects.

The participation in the Erasmus Key Action 1 and Key Action 2 will substantially contribute to the achievement of the strategic objectives of the WSAAS regarding higher education internationalization policy. The Strategy of Internationalisation recognised the following objectives:

- Increasing the international mobility of staff – in terms of outgoing mobility opportunities. The focus will be on the mobility aimed at gaining new experiences in all aspects of work at higher education institutions, such as working in new conditions and environment, conducting practical classes, and making new contacts and partnerships. The mobility of non-teaching staff is also aimed at acquiring new experiences, but also at familiarizing the staff with new procedures, and enabling the transfer of these procedures with a view to optimizing the work process at the institutional level. The incoming mobility of teaching staff should bring an added value to the implementation of the teaching process, raise the level of interactivity of lectures, and have a positive impact on our teaching staff members.
- Increasing the international mobility of students - we will try to explore short-term mobility in order to encourage the participation of a more diverse student body. Equal opportunities would be offered to our students in first and second cycle, regardless of their social background. We strive to provide our graduates with employability skills, and believe that mobility activities can make a significant contribution to their future success and employability. We will actively promote to both our students and staff the

personal and professional development benefits of international mobility, which will help to develop transferrable skills employers are looking for.

- Modernizing study programmes and promoting “internationalization at home”. Through the participation in international cooperation projects, the modernisation of the existing study programmes and their harmonization with the similar programmes in the EU has been achieved. The harmonization has been carried out on the basis of objectives and outcomes of the curricula, the structure of curricula, course syllabus, ECTS credits, etc. In addition, eight laboratories have been fully equipped. The modernization and quality enhancement of teaching/studying process ensures that a majority of students benefit from the internationalization strategy. This part of strategy will ensure “internationalization at home” and significantly widen the impact of institution’s international activities. Students that are not involved in mobility activities will thus have an opportunity to develop skills and acquire the knowledge required in the globalized world. Therefore, our institution's strategy is to actively pursue collaboration in international projects relating to teaching and training, which also complies with the Draft of the Serbian Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy.
- Establishing strategy cooperation, partnerships, and capacity building - development of international cooperation, new partnerships, new knowledge and technologies in our curricula will significantly improve our position on the labour market and establish conditions for making new partnerships with companies from the region and beyond. This way, the conditions will be set out for improving cooperation, speeding the transfer of knowledge and technology, and developing and introducing innovative solutions and methods in both production and teaching processes.

To this end, the WSAAS strongly encourages and supports the mobility of staff (both teaching and administrative) and students, providing them with all the necessary information, linguistic, administrative and technical support. In order to increase the number of students with strong international and intercultural competencies, the WSAAS have developed the mechanisms of recognising their mobility achievements and including them in their Transcript of Records and Diploma Supplement. In order to increase the number of college employees with strong international and intercultural competencies, our employees have flexible timetable and working hours, and they are granted full-pay leave while abroad. The international activity indicators of teachers are considered as an additional selection criterion for the election of teachers.

The internationalization programme is promoted on the WSAAS website, as well as through social networks, local media and all the events organised by the institution, such as the WSAAS anniversary celebration and the international conference we hold on a regular basis.

The mobility candidates are selected and grants awarded in a fair, transparent, coherent and documented way, in line with the provisions of the contract with the National Agency. The adopted institutional “Regulations on staff and student mobility” ensures fair and transparent procedures throughout all mobility stages and in the process of responding to queries/complaints from mobile students/staff, as well.

The WSAAS ensures that there is no discrimination based on sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, national minority membership, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation. The

WSAAS is committed to providing special support to students with disabilities in order to enable them to participate as fully as possible in the student life. We believe that higher education is not the privilege of the elites, and are strongly devoted to the development of inclusive policies and practice. In the case of credit mobility, tuition, registration, examinations or access to laboratory and library facilities are free of charge to incoming mobile students.

The WSAAS shall do its best to ensure the full automatic recognition of all credits (based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS) gained for learning outcomes satisfactorily achieved during a period of study/training abroad, including the period of blended mobility. It is envisioned that all credits gained during the period of study abroad – as agreed in the Learning Agreement and confirmed by the Transcript of Records – are transferred without delay and counted towards the students' degree without any additional work or assessment of the student. All details of terms, conditions and practices of recognition procedures are published on the institution website.

The WSAAS shall do its best to provide a high-quality support for the achievement of the quality standards defined in the ECHE for mobility and cooperation activities and their participants from the HEIs, and to provide support and follow-up during and after the implementation phase of the mobility and cooperation projects in terms of management involvement, resources and staff recognition.

The WSAAS shall focus on supporting the process of internationalization by using new technologies such as e-learning, online services, and user space on the web. Moreover, an effort shall be made to implement the digital mobility management in line with the technical standards of the European Student Card Initiative.

Whenever possible, the environmentally sustainable and responsible behaviour shall be promoted. The WSAAS shall support all measures that may offer added value by actively promoting and organising activities that allow mobile participants to be civically engaged, develop their skills beyond the formal education setting, volunteer and take an active part in their local society.

Through the internationalization process, staff and student mobility, the WSAAS intends to modernise its study programmes and attract a growing number of potential students, including students from foreign countries. The mobility activities are aimed at increasing the number of staff and students with international experience, by extending the range of opportunities offered to them. Both academic and administrative staff members are provided with mobility opportunities, as their mobility is invaluable for the successful partnership management and support of cooperation projects.

Erasmus Actions the Academy Intends to Take Part in

The WSAAS envisions taking part in the following Erasmus actions: KA1 – Learning mobility; KA2 - Partnerships for cooperation and exchanges of practices and Partnerships for innovation; and KA3 - Support to policy development and cooperation.

The WSAAS recognizes several crucial steps for the successful implementation of the above-mentioned actions in practice. First, the WSAAS develops and straightens its cooperation

with partners in other countries within the framework of its clear internationalisation strategy. The establishment of partnerships with institutions recognizable by the results in the area of education, development, innovation and research, allows the transfer of good practices and experience. In addition, establishing partnerships beyond the academic environment, with the economy and industry representatives, as well as with regional authorities and policy makers, will contribute to the aspiration of the WSAAS to provide its graduates with employability skills, relevant for the international labour market.

Next, the WSAAS promotes and supports student mobility, with a strong devotion to the development of inclusive policies and practice. The WSAAS is committed to providing special support to students with disabilities in order to enable them to participate as fully as possible in the student life. The mechanisms for recognising student mobility achievements are developed and they shall be included in the Diploma Supplement.

As for staff mobility, the WSAAS recognises the importance of the results achieved by the engagement in individual staff mobility programmes or in cooperation projects with strategic partners. International experience counts towards the professional development and promotion of our staff members, particularly towards the promotion of teachers.

In order to further improve its international performance and successfully implement further actions, the WSAAS draws on the experience gained from previous international cooperation. In particular, the WSAAS takes into account the results of internal monitoring of European and other cooperation activities to date. Encouraging and good practical experience from previous cooperation projects is incorporated in the new project proposals for the current KA2 call.

The fundamental principles of the selected Erasmus actions are fully in line with the objectives of the Internationalization strategy of the WSAAS, which relies on intense student and staff mobility, exchange of good practices, a vibrant exchange of ideas and innovative solutions, with the final goal to provide a modern, innovative and internationally oriented learning environment.

The Envisaged Impact of the Participation of the Academy in the Erasmus+ Programme

The participation in the Erasmus+ Programme will exert a strong impact on the WSAAS students and employees but also on the institution as a whole.

Students will benefit from the learning experience in an international environment, with a positive impact on their professional and personal development and a strong improvement of their employability skills. The previous analyses of student mobility impacts showed that the highest values among Erasmus students in terms of outcomes were attributed to cultural enhancement, personal development and foreign language proficiency. In addition to the acquisition of the employability and professional skills, student mobility will contribute to the establishment of the European identity of students and their overall self-confidence. Thus, the

Erasmus mobility will help students become internationally competent and well-prepared for job requirements in the closely interrelated European economy.

The impacts mentioned above will be measured by qualitative and quantitative indicators. Quantitative indicators of student mobility will include the number of outgoing and incoming students, duration of mobility periods, percentage of recognized ECTS credits, number of participants with fewer possibilities included in the mobility programmes.

Qualitative indicators are the improved knowledge, skills and competences of students, increased awareness of the importance of the mobility programmes, cultural enhancement, development of the European identity. Qualitative indicators will be assessed using a questionnaire, and they will be expressed as follows: the rate of students declaring an improvement in transversal skills; the rate of students declaring that they acquired new knowledge and professional skills during mobility; the rate of students expressing the intention to participate more actively in political and social life; the rate of students declaring that they felt themselves to be the citizens of Europe; the rate of students having improved their linguistic skills during mobility.

The staff will benefit from a vibrant exchange of ideas and innovative solutions in an international environment, contributing in particular to the self-assessment of their prior knowledge and skills and to their motivation to learn. Importantly, it will improve their teaching methods and tools through the effective use of innovative solutions and digital technologies. They will have unprecedented possibilities to develop professionally, to compare themselves to their colleagues from partner institutions, and make contacts that will last and lead to new collaborations. An international project community enables fostering negotiation and communication skills that are vital for accomplishing joint tasks. Then, there are skills concerning creative problem solving and design thinking during the implementation of projects. And finally, the participants acquire and develop leadership and management skills, which directly contribute to the successful completion of individual activities and the action as a whole.

Quantitative indicators of staff mobility will include the number of outgoing and incoming staff, duration of mobility periods, number of training mobility stays, number of teaching mobility stays. In addition, the following qualitative indicators will be monitored: the rate of employees having changed their methods of teaching or their professional practices after their mobility stays abroad; the rate of staff declaring that they established cooperation with economic stakeholders, including businesses; the rate of staff declaring that they strengthened or expanded their personal network or established new contacts; the rate of staff declaring they improved their use of English and/or the language of the host country; the rate of staff declaring they received at least one type of recognition by their organisation following their mobility; the rate of staff declaring that their mobility will lead to the internationalisation of their organisation.

At the institutional level, the major expected benefit is the modernization of study programmes, quality enhancement of the teaching/learning process, implementation of innovative learning and research opportunities. As a consequence, the WSAAS will increase

its attractiveness for domestic and international students, but also for teaching staff. The participation in international cooperation projects will also build mutual confidence, and consequently create networks and lay the groundwork for future accomplishments through inter-institutional agreements in the sphere of mobility schemes, exchange or adoption of good practices, joint research and publications, co-organized conferences, new project applications, and alliances. Thus, the participation in Erasmus projects will contribute to the European dimension of the WSAAS.

At the institutional level, the impact will be monitored through the rate of new contacts/networks established by staff taking part in mobility programmes, number of new projects designed, number of established partnerships, number of staff involved in international cooperation projects.