



## Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curriculum at Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies–Sirmium

Maja Cvijetić<sup>1</sup>, Dejan Savičević<sup>2</sup>, Gordana Mijailović<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

*Preschool teacher education in Serbia is realized at high vocational schools (Preschool Teacher Training Colleges) and faculties. The reform of higher education has resulted in significant changes in the level and duration of studies, structure and content of study programs. Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies – Sirmium in Sremska Mitrovica continues long tradition of teacher and preschool teacher education in the region of Srem. It took active part in the process of harmonization and modernization of curriculum within the scope of the "Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia" (TEACH) project. The project was realized from 2013 to 2016. Four Preschool Teacher Training Colleges from Serbia (Vršac, Novi Sad, Kruševac and Sremska Mitrovica) participated in the project, in partnership with the Metropolitan University of Manchester (United Kingdom), the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Maribor (Slovenia), the Preschool Teacher Training College from Baja (Hungary) and the Western Balkan Institute WEBIN from Belgrade (Serbia), with the financial support of the European Commission. Cooperation with other Preschool Teacher Training Colleges in the region and EU partners during the implementation of the project has improved the process of harmonization and made preschool teacher education responsive to labour market demands and strengthened the links with local community. The authors of this paper present the results of the harmonization of preschool teacher education curriculum based on a comparative analysis of the existing study programs, focusing on the outcomes and competences of graduates. In the future Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College will continue the cooperation with other preschool teacher training colleges in Serbia and abroad in order to examine the possibilities of continuous education courses improvement, as well as the possibilities of professional development of preschool teachers which would lead to improvements in the knowledge and skills of early childhood professionals.*

*Key words: preschool teacher education, curriculum, outcome, harmonization*

### Introduction

Higher education in Serbia is provided at faculties and colleges of applied studies. Serbia started the reform of its higher education system by joining the Bologna Process in 2003, followed by the adoption of the new Law on Higher Education in 2005. This law introduced the European Credit Transfer System, three-cycle system of study and diploma supplement. As a result, from the school year 2007/8, all newly admitted students have studied under the reformed study programmes at all higher education institutions. The reform process was continued by the adoption of the standards for accreditation, self-evaluation and external quality control in 2006, which set conditions for the start of the process of accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes in 2007. Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia until 2020, adopted in 2012, is also an important document seeking to identify purposes, goals, directions, instruments and mechanisms for the development of the education system in the Republic of Serbia. (1).

In the past preschool teachers and teachers were educated at Teachers' Secondary Schools and Pedagogic Academies. Preschool Teacher Training Colleges were established in 1993, and former

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<sup>1</sup> Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies – Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia

<sup>2</sup> Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies – Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia

<sup>3</sup> Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies – Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia



schools for preschool teachers had to start the process of modernization in accordance with contemporary scientific and professional knowledge and the needs of practice.

Preschool teacher education in Serbia is realized at high vocational schools (Preschool Teacher Training Colleges) and faculties. Preschool teachers are currently educated at two levels: Professional studies (bachelor, specialist and master) Academic studies (bachelor and master). Still, some authors (2) consider that some weakness that refer to the competence concept are still present, as well as the structuring of the program according to the disciplinary model, which is not in line with contemporary approaches and programs of pre-school education, based on the holistic approach, integrated and situational learning.

Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College – Sirmium in Sremska Mitrovica continues long tradition of teacher and preschool teacher education in the region of Srem. The College has accredited curricula of bachelor professional studies, specialist professional studies and master professional studies. The programmes aim at developing students' abilities of integrated approach to the education of preschool children aged 3 to 7. Preschool Teacher Training College has also accredited Distance Learning Course. Professors at Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College have been involved in numerous activities aimed at professional development of preschool teachers, which led to improvements in the knowledge and skills of early childhood professionals.

Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College in Sremska Mitrovica gained valuable experience during the implementation of TEMPUS TEACH project "Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia" (544141-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-RS-TEMPUS –JPCR) which was realised from 2013 to 2016 with the aim to modernize the curriculum so that it better fits European preschool teacher education standards.

### **Harmonization of preschool teacher education curricula in serbia**

Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies – Sirmium, took active part in the process of harmonization and modernization of curriculum and participated in core modules for obligatory and elective courses development within the scope of the "Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia". Four Preschool Teacher Training Colleges from Serbia, (Vršac, Novi Sad, Kruševac and Sremska Mitrovica) participated in the project in partnership with the Metropolitan University of Manchester (United Kingdom), the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Maribor (Slovenia), the Preschool Teacher Training College from Baja (Hungary) and the Western Balkan Institute WEBIN from Belgrade (Serbia), with the financial support of the European Commission Cooperation with other Preschool Teacher Training Colleges in the region and EU partners during the implementation of the project has improved the process of harmonization and made preschool teacher education responsive to labour market demands and strengthened the links with local community.

Specific objectives of the project referred to: harmonizing curricula through identifying the role model curricula and developing curricula harmonization plans; implementing the harmonized curricula through accreditation and enrollment of students; improving transversal skills of teachers and improving teaching methodology and entrepreneurial competences of teachers through identifying learning outcomes and methods.

Project activities included: comparative analysis of curricula, defining the harmonization frameworks, harmonization activities on institution level, study visits, needs assessment, interactive seminars, designing of ToT sessions, accreditation of harmonized curricula, enrollment of students, internal students and teachers evaluation, media promotion activities, adoption of skills improvement strategy, progress evaluations, as well as final external evaluation.

Accreditation of harmonized curricula proved to be very important, since the experience and newly acquired skill enabled teachers employed at Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College – Sirmium in Sremska Mitrovica, to accredit master study program for preschool teachers due to the gained knowledge about contemporary trends in preschool education in Serbia and abroad. Teachers at Preschool Teacher Training College in Serbia had to modernize their syllabus and write it in accordance with desired outcomes and competences of future preschool teachers (4).

The framework for the curriculum harmonization is the result of joint work of representatives of all the participating colleagues, their teachers and students, as well as EU partner institutions on the project.

Element	Harmonization framework
Profile	Professional preschool teacher
Study program	Preschool teacher
Purpose of the study program	Education for the profession of a preschool teacher
Aim of the study program	Education and training of students for work with preschool children (aging between 6 months and 7 years) through acquisition of general and professional knowledge and relevant competencies
Entrance examination	Consists of 2 tests of prior knowledge and abilities check: - Mother tongue and general knowledge test) - Check of speech, musical and physical abilities;
Mandatory courses	Total number of points ranging between 130–150 ECTS
Optional courses	Total number of points ranging between 30–50 ECTS (including final paper)
Portion of professional practice	Minimal number of days should be 30
Final paper	Mandatory written final paper, dealing with a profession related topic, final practical work realized through practice
Diploma supplement in English	Yes
Harmonization at qualitative level	Competences: at least 75% of harmonization, referring to adopted list of generic and subject specific competences

### Methodological frame of comparative analysis

The colleges agreed on the segments that make up each curriculum, referring to the name of the program, the purpose and objective of the study program, entrance exam, practice and final work. They also came to a consensus on the relationship between the compulsory and optional-electoral subjects, expressed in ECTS points, as well as equal representation from certain compulsory subjects in the curriculum relevant areas (3). At the end of the process, compulsory courses, or competencies that students acquire through them, matched at least 75%. Thus, a significant segment of harmonization was decided upon. In this regard, a list of preferred generic competences was adopted by all colleges involved in the project.

Professional competences for the organization of learning and teaching referred to creating a stimulating social and physical learning environment, ability to use co-operative and interactive methods and techniques in learning and teaching to develop children's knowledge and skills, ability to to develop program and activities stimulating and supporting development in each upbringing-educational field, ability to adjust chosen teaching methods to learning aims within child-oriented teaching. Professional competence for team work referred to knowledge and experience of establishing partnerships with key stakeholders (children, families, community, schools), as well as the ability to recognize and carry out role in a pre-school educational team, working closely with other colleagues as well as with child's family. Professional competence for planning, monitoring and documentation of educational activities referred to applying knowledge of planning and implementation of educational programs, monitoring and documenting the development of individual and groups of children. Organizational skills and pedagogical guidance of groups referred to ability to use various strategies for the planning and realization of pre-school educational programs. Knowledge of developmental and learning needs of children referred to ability to design and develop group activities that differentiate children's learning needs and the ability to recognize differences in all areas of child's development. Knowledge of the system of preschool education referred to ability to understand and apply the laws and regulations in relation to preschool education. Ability to use information and communication technologies in education referred to the ability to utilize ICT and digital media as a source of information, as well as to competently present professional achievements using ICT, but also to be familiar with ethical and legal obligations, as well as personal responsibilities in communication and use of digital sources. Ability to plan own professional development referred to understanding of the importance of Continuous Professional Development/ lifelong learning and knowledge how to plan professional development to enhance own practice. Specific competences, knowledge and skills referred to understanding of how to use arts, music, speech, drama or texts in the classroom to meet learning needs. Social inclusion, difference and diversity referred to ability to design



and integrate in the classroom, pedagogic and methodical procedures for children from diverse backgrounds, respecting individual differences, developmental difficulties, as well as the principles of diversity and multiculturalism in education. Transferable/Transversal skills referred to ability to read, analyze and integrate academic literature, ability to apply critical reasoning, as well as to plan professional and career engagement within the field of employment.

## Conclusion

Following the framework, Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College – Sirmium in Sremska Mitrovica prepared individual school plans for curriculum harmonization. By June 2015, 20 % of the planned harmonization was carried out and during the last quarter of the same year documents for the accreditation of the study program were submitted to the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance. Successful accreditation process and the enrollment of the first generation of students enabled the management of the College to start the process of the accreditation of master studies, which was successfully completed last year. The first generation of master students has the opportunity to acquire new knowledge based on innovated syllabus that focuses not only on relevant professional knowledge, but professional competences, as well. In the future Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College will continue the cooperation with other preschool teacher training colleges in Serbia and abroad in order to examine the possibilities of continuous education courses improvement, as well as the possibilities of professional development of preschool teachers which would lead to improvements in the knowledge and skills of early childhood professionals.

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