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Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)
Ms Barbara Gessler
Head of Unit A4

Cc: Mr Eduardo Luceno Carracedo, Project Officer

Subject: Official request for extension of the implementation period for 1 year for the project 619239-EPP-1-2020-1-ME-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

Dear Ms Gessler,

We hope this message finds you well. We are writing to submit an official request for an extension of the implementation period for the Erasmus+ CBHE project "**Development of Regional Joint Master Program in Maritime Environmental Protection and Management (MEP&M)**" - project no. 619239-EPP-1-2020-1-ME-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP.

The project started on 15 January 2021 and should run until 14 January 2024. During the period of project implementation, we encountered some obstacles which resulted in deviations in producing foreseen project outputs/results on time.

At the beginning of the project, resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced slight deviations in delivering outputs on time. Subsequently, as we approached the first reporting period, we faced additional setbacks in finalizing the joint procurement of equipment organised by the University of Montenegro. This delay was caused by the closure of all Montenegrin Government websites, including the site for public procurement, due to prolonged international cyber attacks that lasted for over two months. The consequences of this delay were significant, as it prevented us from fully utilizing 70% of the first pre-financing instalment. A major portion of this instalment was intended for the purchase of equipment within the first reporting period. As a result, EACEA subsequently reduced the second pre-financing instalment by €81,945.80. Moreover, the procurement process was further complicated by prolonged equipment delivery times from distributors. These delays were caused by difficulties in obtaining necessary bank guarantees (in January and February 2023) and changes in customs regulations in Albania (in April 2023). Despite these challenges, we are actively working to resolve these issues, and we expect to have all equipment delivered, installed, and ready for use by the end of July 2023. In light of these circumstances, the procurement process, which includes acquiring Distance Learning equipment, electronic books, and equipment for field exercises, has indeed played a significant role in the overall delay in developing teaching materials, e-lectures, and laboratory exercises.

Apart from the challenges related to equipment procurement, the most significant obstacle we faced was the prolonged accreditation process for the Joint MSc Program in Maritime Environmental Protection and Management. According to both Montenegrin and Albanian legislation, universities intending to establish international joint master programs are required to obtain national accreditations before organizing such programs. To adhere to this requirement, the University of Montenegro, Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor initiated the accreditation procedure well in advance. This procedure in Montenegro encompasses the following phases:

1. Development of a new national qualification from the Montenegrin National Council for qualifications. Providing a decision on the developed national qualification of MSc in MEP&M was a prerequisite to completing accreditation documentation.
2. Accreditation procedures within the University, which include Initiative from the Faculty of maritime studies Kotor and positive decisions on the Initiative from the University's Center for quality assurance, Senate and the Governing Board.
3. Accreditation procedure at Montenegrin Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education.
4. Licensing of the Institution for conducting study program by the Ministry of Education.

Given that this is the first joint program of its kind in Montenegro, it was taken into account that the entire procedure according to the Law on Higher Education requires a little more time than the standard one. To ensure a smooth process, we initiated the procedure well in advance, over a year before the anticipated commencement of the Joint Master's program in October 2023.

The first phase commenced on September 9th 2022, with the Faculty of maritime studies Kotor sending a letter to the University's Center for quality assurance with the all necessary documentation needed for the development of a new national qualification. In the letter, the urgency of timely action was emphasized. After processing documentation, in the name of the University, the Center sent an official request with provided documentation for the development of national qualification to the National Council for Qualifications on September 20th 2022. A positive decision from the National Council for Qualifications was obtained on March 9th 2023. Usually, this relatively simple procedure lasts for a couple of months, but in this case, it lasted for 6 months with numerous urgencies for processing our documentation. By having this decision, documentation for accreditation was completed.

The second phase included receiving a positive decision on the documentation for accreditation of MSc in MEP&M from the University's bodies, the Board of the Faculty of maritime studies Kotor (received on March 14th 2023), the University's Center for quality assurance (received on March 24th 2023), Senate of the University (received on March 29th 2023) and Governing body of the University (received on April 27th 2023). This phase was completed in less than two months, which was relatively quick.

The third phase commenced on May 5th, 2023, as all the necessary documentation, including decisions and the Preliminary Agreement for conducting the joint master

program MEP&M, signed by 3 rectors, was promptly sent by the University's Center for Quality Assurance to the Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education of Montenegro. Despite the urgency expressed in a letter dated June 6th, 2023, we received information from the Agency on June 28th, indicating that our documentation is still undergoing processing. This means that the appointment of an international commission for accreditation by the Agency is yet to happen, and this particular procedure can take several months. Considering the impending summer holidays and the extended processing timeline, it is evident that the University of Montenegro, Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor, will not be able to conclude this accreditation process before October 2023, which was the intended start date for the Joint Master program.

In addition to the accreditation process, the fourth phase is yet to begin.

Enclosed you can find the communication documents for the Montenegrin accreditation process.

On the other side, Albanian legislation offers a higher level of flexibility at the beginning, enabling universities to initiate joint master programs with a license rather than full accreditation. The formal accreditation process begins at the start of the last semester of the program realization. Presently, Albanian universities (Aleksander Moisiu from Durres and Ismail Qemali from Vlore) are eagerly awaiting a decision from their Ministry of Education regarding the licensing of the joint MSc program in MEP&M.

Despite our best efforts to expedite the process, unforeseen complexities and administrative requirements led to significant delays in securing the necessary accreditations. This situation has considerably impacted the overall timeline for organizing the Joint MSc Program. Notwithstanding these challenges, we remain dedicated to completing the accreditation and licensing processes promptly. Our goal is to ensure that the Joint MSc Program in Maritime Environmental Protection and Management receives the required national accreditations and licenses at the earliest possible time, allowing us to proceed with organizing the program successfully.

Therefore, we find it necessary to seek additional time to achieve the project's intended objectives successfully. The extension is vital for ensuring the quality and impact of the project, as well as allowing us to fulfil our commitments.

For these reasons, we are kindly inquiring about the possibility of having an extension of the eligibility period, which would allow us to follow up the process of accreditation and licensing of the Joint master program MEP&M, and to start with the program in the academic 2024/25 year.

We would be very grateful if you could extend the MEP&M project (609675-EPP-1-2019-1-ME-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP) for 1 (one) year starting from January 15, 2024, to January 14, 2025.

We emphasize that the proposed extension would not have any implications on the project budget. Enclosed you can find the updated work programme.

MEP&M project management board, at the meeting in Durres, Albania, on Friday, June 30th 2023 has agreed on the proposed extension of the project as well as on the proposed plan of activities in the extended year.

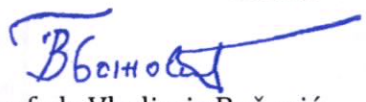
Also, we ensured timely communication by informing the different EACEA project officers (Ms Anna Grelli and Mr Eduardo Luceno Carracedo) for the MEP&M project, the EACEA external evaluator (Ms Anna Lodeserto) and the Montenegrin National Erasmus+ office (Ms Vanja Drljević) about the issues we encountered during the project's implementation.

We hope you understand our reasoning and that you will consider granting an extension of the project eligibility period to allow us to finalise all anticipated activities within the MEP&M project.

Sincerely,



Rector


Prof. dr Vladimir Božović

Annexes:

- Communication related to the accreditation process, Letters 1-6
- List of activities for extended year

List of activities for extended year

Activity	Title
Dev 2.3	Development of e-lectures
Dev 2.4	Accreditation of master program curricula
Dev 2.5	Start-up and self-evaluation of the master program
Dev 3.3	Development/Redesign of English websites of Montenegrin and Albanian HEIs with information on MSc in MEP&M
Qpln 4.2	Development and implementation of Internal Quality Control and Monitoring Plan
Qpln 4.3	External Quality Control and Evaluation
Qpln 4.4	Impact Analysis
Diss&Expl 5.1	Development and implementation of dissemination and exploitation plans
Diss&Expl 5.2	Website of the project and social media accounts
Diss&Expl 5.3	Dissemination products and materials
Diss&Expl 5.4	Dissemination and exploitation events
Diss&Expl 5.5	Development of exploitation roadmap
Diss&Expl 5.6	Exploring possibilities for the continuation of the cooperation with the EU partners
Mngt 6.2	Project meetings
Mngt 6.3	Day-to-day management of the project activities
Mngt 6.4	Periodic and final reports to EACEA
Mngt 6.5	External financial control