



# Western Balkans Platforms

on Education and Training &  
Research and Innovation

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6<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting

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Belgrade, Serbia  
28-29 September 2017

# FINAL REPORT

## Context

Since its launch in 2012, the European Commission organises an annual high-level meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training. All Ministers of Education in the region are invited to review the state of educational reforms in their countries, learn about the latest strategies in the EU, identify priorities, agree on follow-up to be given to studies/reports as well as to cooperate on activities undertaken by the Platform. A main objective of the Platform is to share experiences and good practices as well as engaging new regional cooperation initiatives which tackle similar issues.

The Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation also meets annually since 2006 with the overall objective to advance on the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area in a perspective of accession to the EU. The Platform discusses the research and innovation capacities in the Western Balkans, participation in the EU's framework programmes for research and innovation, monitors the progress of regional strategies and actions and helps in exchanging information and best practice.

This year it was decided to hold the meetings of the two Platforms together on 28-29 September 2017 in Belgrade. The Ministers met in the mornings of 28 and 29 September to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus+ programme and to discuss the Education & Training part of the agenda, and in the afternoon of 28 September to discuss the Research & Innovation part.

## DAY 1 Thursday, 28 September 2017

### Session 1: From Erasmus to Erasmus+, A Story of 30 Years

#### Opening Remarks

The Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and exchange of knowledge and practices. Mentioning that Serbia is preparing for full participation in Erasmus+, he pointed out the significance of this programme and reported a growing number of projects. While focusing on internationalisation of higher education, Serbia also implements projects in the fields of school and vocational education. The Minister identified teacher training and linking education with the labour market as highly relevant topics.

The European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport emphasised the value of student and staff mobility, which has a positive impact on cooperation, mutual understanding and employability. Young people get the opportunity not only to return more independent and qualified for the world of work, but also to hear other views, challenge their own, and learn to cherish diversity. The Commissioner stressed the increasing participation of Western Balkan countries in various Erasmus+ projects and Horizon 2020.

The Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia focused on the EU's objectives concerning the Western Balkan region. In this context, the Union offers assistance and support in educational reforms, reducing social exclusion, building a common identity and linking education to the labour market. He also remarked that mobility and education in general contribute positively to the accession process of the Western Balkans to the EU.

#### Panel debate with Western Balkans alumni on the impact of Erasmus+

Alumni representatives of the Western Balkans unanimously agreed that participating in EU funded education, training and youth programmes (e.g. Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Youth in Action, Erasmus+ etc.) had been an invaluable experience for them in terms of personal and professional contacts, eliminating prejudices, getting acquainted with different cultures and gaining new skills and knowledge. The Commissioner underlined that Erasmus+ is not only about mobility, but also about youth, sports etc.

While their stay abroad aroused a lot of curiosity and interest in mobility opportunities, students sometimes encountered mistrust and struggled to reintegrate upon return to their home country. One of the objectives of the future Western Balkans Alumni Association (WB AA) is to help cope with this issue.

## Session 2: Purpose of a Regional Policy Dialogue

### Scope and Objectives of the Meeting; Update on Regional Activities

The European Commission examined short and long-term objectives of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training, and highlighted important achievements in the Western Balkans resulting from and supported by the Platform. The focus was placed on major initiatives having been put in place following the 2015 Ministerial Meeting.

One of them is the Western Balkans' participation in internationally recognised tests evaluating students' academic performance such as TIMSS - the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study - and PIRLS - the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. The message directed at the competent authorities was to remain committed to the successful implementation of these assessments, which should lead to better performance of the education system, better students' skills, and better PISA results.

### Setting-up of a regional Western Balkans Alumni Association (WB AA)

Another major initiative presented was the establishment of the Western Balkans Alumni Association. Its objectives are manifold:

- promote mobility opportunities
- track students who have graduated from university
- support and mentor students
- share information about internship and employment opportunities
- bridge the gap between higher education and the labour market
- establish and facilitate dialogue with stakeholders at all levels (ministries, higher education institutions, National Erasmus+ Offices)
- support modernisation of the teaching process and methodologies
- share best practices

The recently established Association is now operational and currently mapping alumni. The official kick-off meeting will be organised in March 2018. Plans for the near future include improving the website, conducting a study tracing those who have completed a mobility programme and evaluating its impact etc.

### Panel Discussion: Priorities for Regional Cooperation

Representatives of the national delegations were invited to give an overview of the state of play, challenges and opportunities for cooperation in their respective countries. Educational reforms are ongoing across the region, often tackling a range of similar issues in the Western Balkans. The following topics requiring joint efforts were identified and reiterated by the national delegations:

- Teacher training

This has been a long-standing, commonly recognised priority that needs further attention and more concrete actions. To this end, Bosnia and Herzegovina suggested drafting a regional strategic document on education and training. In addition, initial teacher education and continuing professional development were highlighted as essential elements in overcoming this issue.

- Recognition of qualifications

Educational reforms widely include the development and implementation of the national qualifications framework (NQF) with a view to recognising diplomas and qualifications, linking education with the labour market, and recognising non-formal and informal learning. The NQF is considered a national and regional priority in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro reported its endeavours to enhance employability through increasing the number and quality of vocational education programmes, whereas Serbia's draft law on education provides for the establishment of an employer council to be involved in designing study programmes.

- Further inclusion of disadvantaged groups and minorities in formal education

Serbia pointed out the importance of instruction in minority languages and increasing the quantity and quality of textbooks for this target group.

- Quality of education at all levels

Although improving the quality of higher education is the highest national and regional priority, pre-university education should not be neglected, as remarked by some delegations. Furthermore, a ranking of higher

education institutions in the region and the development of quality assurance mechanisms would be of particular importance.

Other priorities mentioned included improvement in data collection mechanisms, increasing digital competences and reforming the VET system.

### Session 3: Increasing Research and Innovation Capacity

#### Feedback from the Steering Platform on Research & Innovation

The Assistant Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia presented the topics and recommendations of the previous day's Platform on Research and Innovation meeting. These fall into four categories:

- Capacity building and exchange of information: Recommendations included mapping capacities for research and development, sharing information and best practices at regional level, linking capacity building activities to the needs of the society, establishing a joint platform for the exchange of smart specialisation and other national efforts. The need for increased funding for research and innovation was also brought to attention.
- Necessity to better connect academia and industry at the national and regional levels, by developing regional centres of excellence and Smart Specialisation Strategies.
- Policy support from the European Commission, including the Policy Support Facility and Smart Specialisation Platform.
- Specific measures for the Western Balkans, such as ensuring further support to strategic institutional development of the region and effective allocation of funds.

The ANTARES Centre of Excellence, funded from the Horizon 2020 programme, was then showcased as an example of best practice in Serbia. The results of the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020 were summarized, showing success in creating jobs and growth, and tackling societal challenges, while also showing the necessity to maximise the impact of research and innovation programmes. The importance of the 'Lamy report' was highlighted as providing directions for the preparation of the next EU Framework Programme for research and innovation.

#### Panel Discussion

Although on the rise, participation of the Western Balkans 6 in Horizon 2020 could still improve. Some of the reasons for a relatively low participation in the programme mentioned during the panel discussion were the following: insufficient promotion of Horizon 2020 in the region, inadequate training of researchers, complex administrative procedures in the Western Balkans, outdated equipment and lack of national funds. In their efforts to boost participation, the Western Balkans use National Contact Points and establish centres for research and innovation, where events and trainings in this field are organised. In addition, Kosovo\* reported introducing new programmes in PhD studies related to science and innovation, Bosnia and Herzegovina drafted a new research and innovation strategy, while Serbia is about to start a joint activity with the United Nations Development Programme. A proposal was put forward by the Macedonian Minister that high ranking projects that are not selected (due to lack of Horizon 2020 resources) should be funded, at least partly, from the state budget. In response to this, the European Commission mentioned the Seal of Excellence awarded to such projects, giving them an opportunity to receive funds from alternative sources.

#### Research Capacity in the Western Balkans

A Higher Education Reform Expert (HERE) presented an ongoing study conducted under the SPHERE project with the objective of assessing research capacities at higher education institutions in the Western Balkans and subsequently providing recommendations to national and EU policy-makers, as well as institutions. In light of the preliminary results, these are the main emerging findings:

- Funding, including private investment and investment from business and industry, is far too low to support research that is competitive at EU level.
- There are too few industrial and high-tech businesses and their demand for research is very low.
- Public research systems are not connected to the industrial sector, which itself is fairly weak.
- The main actors of research systems do not cooperate, and have low levels of trust.
- The general perception of the relevance of research is quite negative.

### Recommendations for Higher Education

- Better define the roles of teaching and research, and accordingly, recognition of research relevance for academic promotion.
- Enable transversal and entrepreneurship training at all levels.
- Provide training for both PhD mentors and doctoral candidates so that they can develop and nurture modern research skills.
- Assess and value international collaboration alongside career development – build capacity and facilitate mobility.

### Recommendations for governments

- Establish funding opportunities for inter- and multidisciplinary research, supporting increased collaboration among and within institutions.
- Support the development of national performance oriented, competitive research funding prioritizing interdisciplinary research.
- Support the development of more fit for purpose governance and management with appropriate levels of subsidiary and staffing.
- Develop adequate administrative support for research.

### **Panel Discussion**

The Western Balkans' delegations all agreed that research capacity in the Western Balkans should be given greater national priority. Regional cooperation was recognised as an important factor in enhancing this capacity and encouraging excellence by creating regional centres of excellence. A good example is Montenegro's regional initiative to establish the 'International Institute for Sustainable Technologies' for the purpose of promoting collaboration between science, technology and industry, and providing a platform for education of researchers based on knowledge transfer.

The ongoing development of smart specialisation strategies underpins national research and innovation strategies and policies. These strategies will help to prioritise national research efforts and allocate the resources needed. Furthermore, assistance in national strategy- and policy-making processes is available through the Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility.

To promote and boost Horizon 2020 participation, an awareness-raising campaign in the Western Balkans 6 will be launched by the Commission after the adoption of the new Horizon 2020 Work Programme covering the period 2018-20.

### Session 4: Inter- and Intra-Regional Mobility

#### Inter-Regional Mobility: Overview of Existing Opportunities & Way Forward

Session 4 opened with a short overview of the Erasmus+ Programme, with a special focus on available mobility opportunities between the Western Balkans and the rest of Europe. The importance of the following elements was highlighted:

- Necessity for the countries to make the best use of EU instruments for education and training
- Recognition of qualifications, as part of establishing a Regional Economic Area
- Intra-regional mobility for pre-university students and teachers as a means to fight stereotypes and prejudices at an earlier age

#### Panel Discussion on Intra-Regional Mobility: Why? How? Who?

The Chair proposed four topics for discussion:

- improving the quality of information provided to young people, especially to vulnerable groups, and making mobility less 'elitist'
- developing a mobility scheme for VET
- developing more joint degree programmes
- continuing efforts to make mobility more attractive

There was a broad consensus that regional cooperation and exchange of best practices were of vital importance for devising and implementing mobility schemes, and advancement of education in general. Organisations such as the Western Balkans Alumni Association (WB AA), the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans (RYCO), and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) play an important role in fostering such cooperation.

WB AA was recognised as an efficient means of spreading information about mobility opportunities and experiences, thus making it more accessible to everyone. The Albanian Director of the Institute for Education Development also mentioned using ICT tools and start-ups to this end.

Mobility in vocational education and training is at a low level across the region. Serbia, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia reported VET to be under reform, stressing their efforts to build links between schools and the business sector or ministries of labour. New modules for vocational education have been developed in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. These activities can step up mobilities in this field.

As regards joint degree programmes, Montenegro informed the panel about a Higher Education Reform Expert (HERE) seminar that took place a few days before, where Montenegro and Croatia signed an agreement to design a joint PhD programme.

It was also pointed out that increasing the number and quality of courses in English was crucial in attracting foreign students. Serbia suggested allocating a specific budget for each international credit mobility project with a view to supporting and encouraging teachers to provide courses in English. The Assistant Minister of Civil Affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported bilateral agreements with universities in the region ensuring equal treatment of foreign students as regards tuition fees. Some panellists expressed the need to promote mobility at pre-university level too.

Summarising the points made during Session 4, the Chair proposed mapping courses in English as well as developing modules, rather than whole programmes in this language. A greater appeal of international mobility could also be achieved by simplifying credit and degree recognition procedures.

Following the summary of the main outcomes of the discussions from the past days, the Serbian Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development closed the conference by expressing his satisfaction with the exchange of information and sharing plans and perspectives, as well as tackling some important topics.

## WB PET Conclusions

Following the two-day meeting, a series of recommendations and suggestions for future cooperation were brought up by the different actors.

During *Session 1: From Erasmus to Erasmus+, A Story of 30 Years*, the following suggestions emerged:

- Recommendations for governments
  - provide proper teacher training, thus narrowing the gap between the Western Balkans and the rest of Europe with regard to teaching methodologies and quality of education
  - start preparatory measures for full participation in Erasmus+ (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is already one of the 33 Erasmus+ Programme Countries and Serbia is well on its way)
  - make use of the Western Balkans Alumni Association (WB AA)
- Recommendations for educational institutions
  - Increase the capacity of human resources within international relations offices to be able to participate in more Erasmus+ projects and ensure good implementation
  - improve the attractiveness of higher education institutions in the region by internationalising their curricula and offering more courses in English
  - improve student support services, using alumni to a greater extent
  - increase cooperation within the region to offer more joint degree programmes
- Recommendations for the European Commission
  - continue sustaining National Erasmus+ Offices with the aim of promoting the Erasmus+ programme
  - make the programme more accessible to disadvantaged and marginalised groups
- Shared recommendations
  - simplify the recognition of diplomas and qualifications; enhance collaboration with National Academic Recognition Information Centres to this end
  - better promote the Erasmus+ programme through student fairs, info days and contact seminars

*Session 2: Purpose of a Regional Policy Dialogue* helped identify specific areas of concern which need further regional cooperation. The importance of teacher training and the increase of quality of education at all levels were highlighted once again. The recognition of qualifications and the further inclusion of disadvantaged groups and minorities in formal education appeared as crucial areas for further collaboration. These topics will be considered for discussion during the next Ministerial meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training.

*Session 3: Increasing Research and Innovation Capacity* highlighted that the development of smart specialisation strategies underpins national research and innovation strategies and policies. The forthcoming smart-specialisation strategies will help to prioritise national research efforts and allocate the resources needed. It will also help to identify regional centres of excellence. It was announced that in order to enhance participation in the Horizon 2020 programme, an awareness and training campaign in the Western Balkans 6 will be launched after the adoption of the new Horizon 2020 Work programme covering the period 2018-20. The Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility is available to assist national strategy and the policy-making processes. The Ministers highlighted the importance of cross regional initiatives to promote science and innovation. Good practices, such as ANTARES Centre of Excellence, should be promoted.

*Session 4: Inter- and Intra-Regional Mobility*, explored the possibility to further enhance intra-regional mobility within the Western Balkans following the Paris Youth Forum conclusions (July 2016) and the Trieste Youth Forum conclusions (July 2017). The following areas were identified for further intra-regional cooperation:

- The role of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) should be further explored. RYCO will be the main vehicle for organising calls on youth exchanges and school exchanges at secondary level. The Commission is ready to help build the capacity of RYCO by offering trainings in Brussels.
- The Young Civil Servants Scheme, funded by the Commission, will continue following its successful first year of implementation.
- The Economic Reform Programmes that the different Prime Ministers endorsed in January 2017 put Vocational Education and Training (VET) at the forefront of reform efforts. The countries need to finish

the comprehensive reforms which they are undergoing and to increase the cooperation with the private sector.

- The Commission will facilitate young learners and staff from the Western Balkans to gain or to improve professional experience by the launch of a pilot scheme for VET mobility.
- The Commission strongly suggests increasing both the quality and relevance at international level of the courses taught. To this end, it encourages the authorities to allow universities to set up English modules that do not necessarily have to be accredited as a whole programme.
- The National Erasmus+ Offices and/or the Western Balkans Alumni Association will work on a mapping of English-taught courses in the Western Balkans to increase mobility of EU students to the region. The final objective is not just to teach in English but to have high quality courses which are comparable at international level

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