

Possible items to consider under the Steering Platform

The agenda set under the S&T Action plan in 2003 was very broad and ambitious which, in part, explains why it has only been partly implemented.

But the fact that in 2003 an ad hoc group on WBC was convened, helped in identifying problems and needs. A time span of 3 years was not enough to address or implement all the actions identified.

It is suggested to build upon the momentum created and pursue work based on information gained and taking into account the overall political commitment of integration into the European Research Area and European Union.

This objective requires a shared vision on which all actions and means are devoted in a coherent way at all levels in the European Union: European Commission, Member States, local stakeholders and other interested parties.

Research as a tool for economic development and integration should be the guiding principle of the Steering Platform in which all Member States, the candidate countries and the Western Balkan countries participate and contribute.

Also other stakeholders are invited to contribute.

Without setting any priority, hereunder a number of areas on which to concentrate efforts are suggested. But above all, the work in the Platform should be bottom-up. Once the priorities are identified, we should discuss how and where to pursue them.

Possible actions

From what we have learned so far, priority action in the WBCs appears necessary in four different areas, without indicating any priority or specific action at this stage, as follows:

- general awareness actions: role of research policy; how to design an integrated research policy; links with other EU policies; Lisbon strategy;
- benefits of collaborative research; association to FP7;
- human resources: facilitate movement of researchers; attract best researchers; and
- infrastructure: improve research capacity (laboratories, institutes, equipment).

Given the fact that research requires substantial investments, it is clear that all the above objectives cannot be achieved without creating synergies between research programme funding and other EU financial instruments such as the Pre-accession funds (IPA).

Coordination of actions with other stakeholders should also actively be pursued. This is in the first place the case with the S&T policies for WBCs from the Member states and candidate countries but also other stakeholders such as the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe; the COST or the Eureka programmes are to be part of these coordinating efforts.

In addition, it should be considered how research can contribute and facilitate the realisation of the overall political objectives such as compliance with *acquis communautaire*; administrative capacity building and institutional stability.

(1) Awareness actions

Awareness is necessary at different stages and levels. At least the following should be considered:

- assist the national administrations in designing an integrated research policy. As part of the Europe Partnership Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), updated Action Plans have been adopted which identify different measures that Balkan countries need to take in the short, medium and long term in order to progress on the partnership agreements with the European Union. All Western Balkan Countries have been asked, as a medium term priority, to design an integrated research policy. This will require some help and explanation on, for example, the correlation between investment in research ad competitiveness, how to transform research efforts into innovation and increased market opportunities and which actions to take to facilitate this (action plan 3%; fiscal measures, mobility);
- organise training and exchange of experience of policy makers and research administrators. In doing so, the WBCs are also better prepared for *acquis* on research policy;
- setting priorities and identify research as a priority for economic and social development.

(2) Promoting research collaboration: FP7

Science is more than any other “product” easy to move. This is why scientific cooperation is often the first area in which trans-border cooperation takes place or as a matter of fact never stops. This should be further stimulated as it leads and facilitates other cooperation. The following actions are suggested:

- information sessions on importance of collaborative research: explain procedures and possibilities under EU research Framework programme and other research actions to conduct research together; advantages of conducting research in European networks, consortia and with scientist from all over the world to improve scientific base and knowledge;
- explain that research actions can play important role in complying with *acquis communautaire*, particularly in complex policy areas which have strong and rapidly evolving scientific bases, such as food safety, environment, energy, security. Disseminate information on JRC enlargement and Integration Action which fosters research networking, transfer of knowledge and training on scientific and technological aspects of EU policies, with the view to facilitate integration process;
- linked to the above promotion actions on participation in the Framework programmes, the WBC should be encouraged, as they are legally entitled to do so, and taking into account their respective absorption capacity, to become associated to the 7th framework programme. This requires more explanation on the merits of such association to the WBCs themselves and a strategy on terms and conditions;

- mapping and setting sectoral/thematic priorities according to the particular needs of each country;
- encourage creation of National Contact Points and offer training for experts and information multipliers, so as to increase participation of research institutes and industry in FP7; encourage international evaluation of national research programmes;
- consider the publication of a *Vade-mecum* which could serve as a manual for administrators, research institutes and private sector on finding the way to participating in EU research actions;
- to unlock the research potential of regions, it is important to develop in the Capacities programme of FP7 support instruments who stimulate S&T cooperation at regional level;
- share knowledge with the neighbouring countries and consider regional development: consider relevance of the “Regions of Knowledge” initiative in sharing and transferring knowledge, exchanging best practices also taking into account the just-started sub-national regionalisation processes enabling the creation of knowledge driven entities.

(3) Mobility of Researchers

For historical well known reasons, Western Balkan countries suffer from “brain drain”. Given status and quality of research facilities and infrastructure in the region, after years of total lack of investment in research, researchers are not attracted to return to the region. Scientists often complain that they have no career perspective in their country or that current employment conditions are so poor that they are not attracted to stay in their countries.

To a certain extent quite a number of Member States in the European Union do equally experience the same concerns of “brain drain” linked to the lack of infrastructure and good career opportunities in their home country. In addition, the lack of possibility to move quickly and for a short duration (visa question and social security issues), is often seen as a barrier to the effective mobility of researchers.

This is why, at European level, a policy on mobility has been developed which is translated into a number of concrete initiatives embedded in an overall targeted strategy aimed at the development of an open and competitive European labour market for researchers. Actions so far have been taken in the following areas:

- improve researcher’s mobility, both trans-nationally as between sectors, through reduced administrative and legal requirements;
- enhancing the status and attractiveness of the researcher’s profession and career;
- boosting financial investments in human resources in R&D, both at national and European level.

It should be considered how WBC could benefit from the analysis made at European level and translate some or most of the actions into their national system. This is particularly relevant for:

- participation in the ERA-More network;
- establishing a Researcher's Mobility Portal;
- organising awareness actions at Universities, Academy of Sciences and leading institutes on importance of European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for their recruitment;
- work on public image on scientist: respect for science in society;
- information sessions on how to benefit more/better from mobility actions organised under FP7. So far only a limited number of researchers from WBCs have taken advantage of the mobility grants. More information is needed why/what the obstacles are and how improve it;
- consider specific actions under the international part of the FP7 People Programme such as the neighbourhood scheme; the incoming fellowship for experienced researchers or open posts in the frame f the Marie curie networks.

All these actions aiming at better connecting the WBC to the integrated European Strategy on human resources which is of mutually beneficial for the WBC and for the EU.

(4) Research facilities/infrastructure

Whenever research opportunities in the WBCs are discussed, it is mentioned that given the lack of good research infrastructure, it is difficult to attract and develop any meaningful research. This is not only the case for WBCs but many other European countries are suffering from lack of investment in new equipment and research infrastructure over the last decade. But there are good reasons to acknowledge that the problem is specifically relevant in the WBCs.

This is why under FP6 two dedicated calls for WBC on strengthening their research capacity have been organised. Judged only from the number of proposals this call can be seen as responding to a real need. Unfortunately, many good projects had to be refused because of lack of money. In the context of European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructure (ESFRI), for example, and in particular during the Research Infrastructure Conference organised in Nottingham (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/criuk/>), the issue of infrastructure for WBC was one of the key points in the discussion in the policy and management session.

However, the EU Research Framework programme, alone, will never be able to inject sufficiently funds to address quickly and effectively the capacities needs of the Region. Moreover, the main purpose of the Framework Programme is to stimulate and fund collaborative research on a competitive basis and not to allocate grants or subsidize the research community in one or another region of the EU. The latter is more the purpose of other EU financial instruments and more in particularly the pre-accession funds. Synergies between these instruments need to be organised.

In order to address properly the concern, it is important to specify that what is to be understood by research infrastructure: equipment; measurement instruments; computers; modernisation of laboratories; human resources or facilities for leading edge-research (such as clean rooms or seismic table). The time element is also important if we do not want to run the risk that the good scientific base which exists in the region is not totally lost.

Taking into account above, the following could be considered:

- mapping of existing infrastructure and research facilities;
- identifying sectoral priorities for the region;

- consider how WBCs could have better access to existing infrastructure in the EU and candidate countries;
- consider how, in the context of the Community actions, the development of research infrastructure could be supported. In considering this, it should be understood that research infrastructure to be identified under the aegis of ESFRI, and/or supported by the FP7 research infrastructure action, are those facilities, equipment and research services which are needed by the research community to carry out leading-edge research. It is to be understood that support is to be built on a consensus basis among all participating members, considering facilities of pan-European interest. Accordingly, the development of one key research infrastructure, of relevance for the region and based on existing experience and state of art research, in one of the WBCs could be feasible. Financing would require careful and strategic consultation among WBCs and other stakeholders but is worth considering and should be seen as a success not only for the country in which the infrastructure is located but for the entire region.

(5) Synergies with other instruments and organisations

Given the substantial level of investment required for research facilities (whether facilities, equipment or breakthrough infrastructure), it is clear that financing under the research instruments alone will not be enough.

This Steering Platform should also consider and plan well in advance how other EU instruments could be called upon to finance actions increasing WBC competitiveness through research:

- consider possibilities under the new pre-accession instrument “IPA”: financing of research capacity building both physical infrastructure as well as human resources in support of economic development and competitiveness. This requires careful planning by each WBC ahead of the multi-planning so that it can be taken up in the Action Programs to be financed by IPA;
- consider also how the other European financial institutions such as EIF, EIB and EBRD could provide for additional financial assistance to WBCs for increasing their research capacities;
- Risk Sharing Finance Facility: to be examined if this financial facility could be used to support research investments and activities in WBC;
- consider synergy with research actions by COST;
- consider coordination with Eureka actions;
- consider coordination with the NATO Science Programme;
- coordinate activities and exchange information with the Stability Pact for South East Europe.