



Joint Science Conference BERLIN PROCESS

ALBANIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE BERLIN PROCESS 2023

JOINT STATEMENT

PARTNERING FOR EXCELLENCE – PARTNERING FOR EUROPE

BERLIN PROCESS JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

7TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS OF THE SCIENCE, EDUCATION, RESEARCH
AND INNOVATION PILLAR OF THE BERLIN PROCESS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

TIRANA · 18 – 20 SEPTEMBER 2023

The 7th Berlin Process Joint Science Conference deliberated on strategic and organisational transformations in the higher education, research, innovation, and technology sectors in the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe, and on measures to promote excellence, mobility, co-operation, and knowledge-driven growth.

KEY MESSAGES FOR HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT

- I. Investment in higher education, research and innovation is a durable investment for growth in the Western Balkans, against brain drain and for accelerating the attainment of European Union membership. We urge the inclusion of such investment in the European Union's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.
- II. Universities, research and development institutions should receive targeted investments from the European Union's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, and national governments should demonstrate resolute commitment to invest in education, research and innovation. These investments will produce excellence in the region, shape the green and digital transformations and redeem structural deficits.
- III. The Western Balkans are making commendable progress in aligning their education, research, and development systems with EU standards. This progress needs to be expedited. Facilitating the mobility of people and ideas will serve as a robust catalyst for EU integration and transnational cooperation.
- IV. Transnational and inter-institutional collaboration is imperative and self-evident in contemporary science and innovation. It is crucial that regional cooperation within Southeast Europe, including the Western Balkans, is supported and not impeded by political issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. **Commit to stable, long-term funding for education and research from national budgets.**

Western Balkan governments and parliaments should allocate a minimum of 4% of national GDP to education and 2% to research and innovation. These minimal thresholds should progressively increase to meet EU targets¹ of at least 5% of GDP for education and 3% for research and innovation.

2. **Include targeted investments in education, research and innovation in the EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and in the Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance.**

Targeted investments in the higher education, research, and innovation sector should be a pivotal component of both the EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the national and regional IPA (besides the Horizon

¹ See https://t1p.de/eurostat_education_gdp and https://t1p.de/eurostat_research_gdp.

Europe association national contributions). These investments are essential for long-term economic growth, resilience, and alignment with EU pathways.

3. Establish *Research and Technology Excellence Hubs*, at least one in every Western Balkan country.

Fund the creation of Research and Technology Excellence Hubs to catalyse competitive research, scalable technology development, and research-industry collaboration, thus acting as driving force for the future regional research and innovation ecosystems. These hubs should connect basic and applied research to technology advancement and encourage regional research networks, while maintaining institutional autonomy and providing attractive working conditions. The selection of concepts for such hubs should meet international standards, it should be competitive, merit-based, and transparent, also considering their potential role in securing European scientific and technological sovereignty.

Ensuring a proper legal framework for these hubs is vital for their success. Based on already existing potentials and on smart specialisation, the hubs should focus on solutions for green and digital transformations, ranging from Nanotechnology to Smart Digital Agriculture, Green Energy and Hydrogen, Genomics, New Materials, and Supercomputing and NextGen AI.

4. Support national *Universities of Excellence*.

Fund national competitions aimed at strategically transforming higher education and enhancing excellence across all fields of higher education, research, transfer and technology development. These competitions should draw inspiration from successful models in other European countries and consider synergies with European Universities alliances. The selection of concepts should meet international standards, it should be competitive, merit-based, and transparent.

5. Promote brain circulation and diaspora engagement.

Implement measures and regulatory changes to facilitate brain circulation and reconnect with the academic and entrepreneurial diaspora.

- a. Adopt a *Regional Framework Agreement for Recognition of Degrees and Qualifications* under the South-East European Cooperation Process (automatic reciprocal recognition of all academic degrees and professional qualifications from public institutions), paired with a charter adoption procedure on institutional level;
- b. Organise an annual academic and entrepreneurship *Diaspora Conference*² in each Western Balkan country, inviting expats to exchange and partner with their peers in the country of origin, and put in place a programme for short-term visits of scientists from the academic diaspora;
- c. Initiate a regional *Western Balkans Marketplace of Ideas* programme to facilitate meetings among professionals in different thematic contexts, e.g. for digital entrepreneurs.

6. Perform a regulatory update on national level (*national Pacts for Education, Research, and Innovation*).

Modernise the Western Balkans's education, research, and innovation systems to align with EU standards. Introduce bipartisan *Pacts for Education, Research, and Innovation*, based, inter alia, on the following guiding principles: cultivating a culture of excellence, including meritocracy and equal opportunities; safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy, including de-bureaucratisation and fair access to national research funding and the involvement of the scientific community in regulation drafting.

7. Persist in establishing the *Western Balkans Research Fund* and renew the *Horizon Europe Widening Special Call for Western Balkans*.

Building upon past recommendations of the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference, both the EU and Western Balkan political decision-makers should prioritise the establishment of the Western Balkans Research Fund. This fund is crucial for fostering research excellence and alleviating brain drain. The successful special Widening call for Western Balkans in Horizon Europe should be renewed, and the financial volume should be increased.

² In addition to the *Regional Diaspora Forum* organised by the Regional Cooperation Council (initial event in 2022).

RATIONALE

CHARTING A NEW COURSE: TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

The higher education, research and innovation systems in the Western Balkans are undergoing profound transformations in the aftermath of the pandemic. These changes are driven by geopolitical shifts, ongoing crises, financial uncertainties, and deteriorating academic freedom. Additionally, the emigration of young generations and the lack of highly-skilled human capital pose significant challenges. Moreover, the pervasive use of generative artificial intelligence, with a lack of ethical and regulatory guidelines, disrupts established systems. Navigating these challenges demands transformative intelligence, ambition, and consistency. The contribution of scientists hereto is undeniable and indispensable.

Individuals and organisations in science and academia in the Western Balkans are taking proactive measures to address these challenges to enhance resilience and strategically reposition for the future. This necessitates reevaluating core concepts in pedagogy, scientific research, university and science management, transfer and innovation activities, and talent mobility. It also calls for modernising outdated public funding approaches, some still in place since the 1980s. These changes can only succeed if there is a collaborative agenda that transcends divisions and is grounded in mutual dialogue. Reforms should involve those actively engaged in the education and R&D system, from students and young entrepreneurs to university faculty and senior scientists.

CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE

The immediate European future of the Western Balkans needs a culture of excellence and meritocracy to enable individuals and teams to excel. Achieving this necessitates the depoliticization of academic life, the reinforcement of quality standards, and the creation of attractive prospects for highly skilled researchers, postgraduates, and students, also from abroad. Attractive career paths should be closely tied to performance outcomes, including rigorous quality standards for academic publications and the enabling of publications in international journals. All of this requires flexibility, responsiveness to reforms, digitally-driven management capacity, and transparent competition.

CONNECTING UNIVERSITIES, RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS AND INDUSTRY FOR INNOVATION

Universities and research institutions will need to forge stronger connections with the private sector, spanning from start-ups to science-industry joint ventures. Emphasising the impact of research, from fundamental to applied, and scalability of innovations is essential. Universities will need to reinforce the dualism of teaching and research, making the existence of consistent research activities a prerequisite for accreditation. They should also tailor their educational programmes to meet the labour market's needs and students' interests. Universities and schools should be supported in their efforts to enhance STEM-education which is essential for technology development and innovation, and the economy. The vertical integration of universities, alongside a horizontal, consolidation of performance and interdisciplinary connectivity of research activities is a complex, but necessary reform process.

FINANCIAL COMMITMENT FOR R&D

Long-term and competitive research and development depend on solid long-term national financial support in addition to external funding sources like Horizon Europe. Thus, a political commitment to allocate a minimum share of GDP for research (2%) and education (4%) is indispensable. While pockets of excellence in R&D have emerged in the Western Balkans and sporadic investment in research infrastructure was made over the past decade, fragmentation remains the key problem. To increase the number and to maximise the potential of these islands of excellence (flagships, hubs and similar), a higher degree of interconnectivity is needed, e.g. through regionally distributed research infrastructure platforms. Addressing regulatory, bureaucratic, and political barriers is essential for integrated concepts to flourish. Building upon the mapping of existing research infrastructures in the Western Balkans conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council, a regional innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem should be consolidated. The latter should incentivise regional collaboration among the public and private hand, and synergies between national smart specialisation strategies.

BRAIN CIRCULATION AS THE NEXT STAGE OF MOBILITY

In the 2020s, the concept of mobility needs to be reimagined as transnational brain circulation, including the diaspora. This novel approach widens traditional academic mobility by enriching it with economic cooperation, cultural and emotional ties with region, mutual interaction, and project-specific collaborations across borders. Flexible working models, multiple affiliations, recognition of transferable qualifications, and free access to labour markets for highly-skilled professionals are also imperative. Brain circulation should be a non-partisan priority, transforming Southeast Europe into a regional marketplace of ideas and talents, effectively compensating the brain drain.

OWNERSHIP AND COMMITMENT

We, as leaders of higher education, research, and innovation institutions, recognise the urgency and complexity of our mission. The transformations cannot wait for the settling of political disputes in the region or further delays. We are taking our responsibility for educating the next generations serious, and we are partnering for success. We pledge to make the most of our countries' association to Horizon Europe and actively engage in shaping the European Research Area and the European Education Area alongside adjacent EU policies in education, research, and innovation. We want to make our voice heard.

We commit to driving these transformations with determination, informed by evidence-based expertise and mutual learning within the Southeast European region and with our EU counterparts, while remaining attuned to global trends. We prioritise openness and mutual dialogue on strategic, organisational, and procedural aspects. We request a substantive and goal-oriented dialogue with political decision-makers and stakeholders, including the European Commission and national governments. We embrace innovation, quality, and transparency across all our endeavours.

We salute efforts aimed at harmonising agendas, such our collaboration with the Rectors' Forum of Western Balkans and Southeast Europe, whose activities demonstrate the will for partnering and reflection on key issues amongst universities of the region. We express the willingness to enhance collaboration with the European Commission, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. We applaud the College of Europe's decision to establish a campus in Tirana and convey our readiness to collaborate. We commend the recommendations on mobility of human capital and ideas issued by the Berlin Process Civil Society Forum. We reaffirm our ownership of the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference as a forum for advancing positive transformation and excellence, and the cooperation on level playing field.

SIGNATORIES

Academy of Sciences of Albania • Austrian Academy of Sciences • Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina • Bulgarian Academy of Sciences • German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina • Academy of Athens • Italian Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei • Italian National Research Council • Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo • Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts • Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts • Polish Academy of Sciences • Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts • Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts • University of Tirana • Conference of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions of Albania • Polytechnic University of Tirana • Agricultural University of Tirana • University of Sarajevo • Rectors' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina • University of Tuzla • University of Banja Luka • University of Mostar • University of Rijeka • University of Applied Sciences of Ferizaj • Conference of Rectors of Public Universities of Kosovo • University of Prishtina • St-Kliment-Ohridski-University of Bitola-Ohrid • Interuniversity Conference of North Macedonia • Sts-Cyril-and-Methodius-University of Skopje • University of Montenegro • University of Belgrade • Conference of Universities of Serbia • University of Novi Sad • University of Ljubljana • Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia • Rectors' Forum of Southeast Europe and Western Balkans • Centre for Advanced Studies Southeastern Europe Rijeka • Centre of Science and Innovation for Development SCiDEV Tirana

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