

**Harnessing the potential:**

**Research Capacity in  
the Western Balkans**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

December 2017

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# Recommendations

The following recommendations to national governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Western Balkans, and to the European Commission (EU) are based on a study conducted in 2017, to assess the research capacity of the higher education institutions in the Western Balkans. The study has been conducted in framework European Commission's initiative «Support to the Higher Education Reform Experts» (SPHERE). For the full report, which also includes performance indicators for each recommendations, please refer to [this document](#).

## Recommendation 1: More and better investment in research

### National level

#### 1.1 Increase investment in research

The WB governments are urged to make higher education and research a high priority and commit to a higher investment, closer to the EU target of 3%, as part of a national strategy towards a knowledge-based economy and society and, if relevant, in view of EU accession. Strategy implementation should be closely monitored.

#### 1.2 Support the development of national performance-oriented, competitive research funding prioritising interdisciplinary research

Increased investment needs to go hand in hand with improved policies and processes for funding to ensure impact, for example, through institutional block grants and competitive research grants, also to enable new ways for research cooperation, among others for interdisciplinary research.

#### 1.3 Ensure national funding for access to international research publications

A first step to improving research capacity in the region is to ensure that researchers can have access to and thus benefit from reading the published works of others. Ministries are urged to make funds available to increase access to journals and other online 'pay per view' research repositories.

### National and EU level

#### 1.4 Make provision to improve and maintain research infrastructures and ensure their shared access

WB governments and the EU are urged to continue investing strategically in research infrastructure in order to ensure that research becomes and remains competitive at EU level. (See also Recommendation 3)

#### 1.5 Establish funding opportunities for inter- and multidisciplinary research, supporting increased collaboration among and within institutions

Both the EU and national funding agencies are urged to design more schemes that foster inter- and multidisciplinary research and to make this part of the policy mix.

## 1.6 Provide funding support for WB regional level research & higher education collaboration

With some notable exceptions, WB research institutions only join international research consortia, if at all, as partners. This prevents them from building up experience and resources to lead international collaboration projects, and also from developing projects geared towards the needs of WB society and economy, as WB national priorities can be different from those of the EU.

Funding provision for regional intra WB research and higher education collaboration would stimulate competition for excellence in the region and reflect national level priorities. It could also stimulate intraregional research and HE collaboration integration and synergies, as some of the systems are too small to develop research capacities and full HE systems at national level. This would make them more visible, stronger in resources and more attractive for international partners. It would benefit not only the HE and research sectors, but would also be likely to render much broader benefits for societies and economies, and also help to frame and steer policy collaboration, for example, at the WB Steering Platform on Research and Innovation, and complement and support the European Research Area (ERA) and the Bologna Process.

The idea of a research fund on regional priorities, allowing for limited participation of countries from outside the region and funds for HE collaboration (including PhDs), as well as mobility of teaching staff and students has been welcomed and strongly recommended by all interview partners. While this might not align with the announced EU accession processes, it is nevertheless mentioned here as a high potential instrument to address some of the issues mentioned above.

## Recommendation 2: Reform of research governance

### National and institutional level

#### 2.1 Support the development of more fit-for-purpose governance and management with appropriate levels of subsidiarity and staffing

Improved governance and associated outcomes are likely to depend on all parties relinquishing some existing individual benefits in order to secure longer term collective benefits.

#### 2.2 Review legislation to enable more collaboration and open access

In dialogue with institutions, national governments should identify and eliminate obstacles to research and education collaboration. Policies for open access to research infrastructure could initiate a positive dynamic. This would be key also with regards to cooperation with industry and general contribution to innovation.

## Recommendation 3: Development of research infrastructure & administrative support

### National and institutional level

#### 3.1 Develop and maintain research infrastructure for shared use

National funding should be provided to purchase and maintain critical research infrastructures. This should include mechanisms to ensure and enable open access for researchers and easy cost sharing between departments and institutions. A policy of open access to research facilities should be the objective for both enterprise (commercial) use and academic collaborations between research groups and research institutions.

#### 3.2 Develop research management capacity

In order to enhance quality and success of research grant applications and management, institutions should develop adequate administrative support structures with appropriately qualified staff. Support staff and researchers should be offered appropriate training on the preparation of high quality project proposals and project management. Participation should be recognised as part of career development.

The respective funds should be situated at institutional level to ensure that measures are designed at appropriate levels of subsidiarity and consider the needs of all researchers.

## Recommendation 4: Profiling of research careers

### National and institutional level

#### 4.1 Enable diverse career paths, based on parity of esteem for research and teaching

Achievement in teaching should not be a substitute for research achievement; it should be better recognised for career advancement and remunerated accordingly. In addition, 'research positions' should be created that require and enable researchers to dedicate more time to research.

#### 4.2 Establish assessment metrics that better recognise high quality research as part of career progression

Improved metrics should encourage quality publication, e.g. in international, peer-reviewed journals with a strong impact factor. This must take into consideration all research areas and should not be a reason to decrease disciplinary breadth and diversity – as publications in sciences and technology may be more readily published in international journals than those in the arts and humanities, which focus on national or regional level studies, e.g. in Albanology.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/policy\\_library/principles\\_for\\_innovative\\_doctoral\\_training.pdf](https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/policy_library/principles_for_innovative_doctoral_training.pdf)

### **4.3 Provide research skills training for both PhD supervisors and doctoral candidates**

Both PhD candidates and supervisors should be required to participate in skills training, in full consideration of the [EU Principles of Innovative Doctoral Education](#) and the [Salzburg Principles](#).<sup>5</sup>

## **Recommendation 5: Strengthening of higher education institutions**

### **National and institutional level**

#### **5.1 Support the development of strong, multiply engaged universities**

Universities should be encouraged and given support to develop distinct profiles and multiple missions in research, teaching and engagement with society, including the private sector. This requires institutional autonomy and accountability.

#### **5.2 Education: support the development of research-based learning and teaching, including transversal and entrepreneurship training at all levels**

Teaching should be informed by research and encourage students to engage in research and knowledge creation in preparation of diverse careers and positions. This requires a stronger emphasis of student-centred learning, learning outcomes, and transversal skills.

#### **5.3 Internationalisation: support the development of institutional strategies and necessary capacities for strategic international collaboration**

Internationalisation is known to improve research excellence and increase research capacity. Strategic internationalisation can also help to mitigate the effects of brain drain.

#### **5.4 3rd Stream (Innovation): improve technology transfer and knowledge exchange**

This could be achieved by creating more grant schemes to encourage collaborative research and permitting industry-sponsored PhDs and representatives from businesses to teach and supervise students. Broadening the policy mix away from pure technology development and into diversified methods of knowledge exchange has been shown to be beneficial in EU member states. Ecosystem approaches could be helpful for a more horizontal development of research and education in the specific local, national and regional context.

