



Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research

Novi Sad Meeting of the Regional Platform Council and collocated Summit Events

Venue: Congress Centre and Hotel CePTOR Andrevlje (Fruška Gora), Novi Sad, Serbia
Dates: 15-17 June 2015

A series of summit events organised under the scheme of Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research aiming to institutionalise benchmarking and cooperation in doctoral studies in the Region, pursue further steps in the course of strengthening policy in research and innovation in the Region, discuss and adopt Platform Action Plan for the period 2015 – 2018, and propose necessary amendments to the “Articles of Association”, the statutory document of the Platform.

In attendance (listed in order of appearance of countries):

Damir Boras, Rector, University of Zagreb, *Croatia*
Ivana Čuković Bagić, Vice-Rector, University of Zagreb, *Croatia*
Husein Nanić, Director, Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*
Draško Marinković, Vice-Rector, University of Banja Luka, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*
Zlatko Žoglev, Rector, St. Clement of Ohrid University, Bitola, *Macedonia*
Emilija Janevik, Vice-Rector, Goce Delcev University, Stip, *Macedonia*
Radmila Vojvodić, Rector, University of Montenegro, Podgorica, *Montenegro*
Viktor Nedović, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, *Serbia*
Vladimir Bumbaširević, Rector, University of Belgrade, *Serbia*
Miodrag Popović, Vice-Rector, University of Belgrade and Adviser to the Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development, *Serbia*
Pavle Sekeruš, Vice-Rector, University of Novi Sad, *Serbia*
Ladislav Novak, Coordinator of the Regional Platform and Chair of the Advisory Board, University of Novi Sad, *Serbia*
Veljko Malbaša, Rapporteur, University of Novi Sad, *Serbia*
Ivan Svetlik, Rector, University of Ljubljana, *Slovenia*
Stanislav Pejovnik, President of the Platform Council University of Ljubljana, *Slovenia*
Mirko Stopar, Acting Director-General, Higher Education Directorate, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, *Slovenia*
Darinka Vrečko, Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, *Slovenia*

Apologies (listed in order of appearance of countries):

Arbjan Mazniku, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education and Sport, *Albania*,

Dhori Kule, Rector, University of Tirana, *Albania*

Mit'hat Mema, Rector, Aleksander Moisiu University, Durrës, *Albania*

Emita Blagdan, Assistant Head, International Cooperation, Agency for Science and Higher Education, *Croatia*

Arbnor Pajaziti, Vice- Rector, University of Prishtina, *Kosovo**

Borčo Aleksov, Deputy Head of Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education and Science. *Macedonia*

Mubera Kurpejović, Director General, Directorate for Higher Education, Ministry of education *Montenegro*

*) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Agenda

TUESDAY 15 June (arrival of participants and informal meetings)

TUESDAY 16 June

10:00-12:30 Preparatory Session 1

Chairperson: *Vladimir Bumbaširević*, Rector, University of Belgrade, Serbia

Focus on the institutionalisation of benchmarking and cooperation in doctoral studies and research and further genuine enhancement of quality of doctoral studies and research beyond established views by introducing an embryo of external examiner system in doctoral studies and launching joint doctoral studies.

15:00 – 17:30 Preparatory Session 2

Chairpersons: *Viktor Nedović*, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Serbia and *Mirko Stopar*, Acting Director-General, Higher Education Directorate, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Slovenia

Focus on benchmarking and cooperation in strengthening policy in research and innovation in the Region and exploration of modalities in the course of institutionalisation of such cooperation.

WEDNESDAY 17 June

10:00 – 11:45 Meeting of the Platform Council

Chairperson: Stane Pejovnik, President of Platform Council, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Focus on the Action Plan for the period 2015 – 2018 including future project activities, operational modalities of the Platform Office in Dubrovnik, amendments to the “Articles of Association” and other issues to be raised during the meeting.

12:00 – 12:30 Closing Session

Chairperson: Ladislav Novak, Coordinator of the Platform, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Participants' reflections on the outcomes of previous sessions and Agreement on the Communiqué

Departure of participants

Minutes

Contents of the Minutes:

Introduction to the Theme
Digest of the Participants' Addresses
Closing addresses
Conclusions
Platform Action Plan 2015-2018
Proposal for the amendments to the Articles of Association

Introduction to the Themes

Mr. Ladislav Novak, Platform Coordinator

I would like to express my great satisfaction of having senior participants at these events, representing a variety of countries, institutions, experiences and responsibilities. This provides opportunity to initiate strategic level debate in the Region on higher education and research issues paving the way for creation of a regional 'collective voice' in higher education and research. Two preparatory summit events to take place on 16th June are to provide inputs for the meeting of Platform Council which is scheduled for 17 June in the morning.

Main focus of the preparatory summit events will be on the institutionalisation of benchmarking and cooperation in doctoral studies in the Region. This includes further genuine enhancement of quality of doctoral studies and research beyond established views. We believe that quality issues in doctoral studies are crucial for the countries which do not belong to the forefront of contemporary technology development. High quality of doctoral studies, research and innovations could allow these countries to catch up the train and make a fresh start together with the technologically advanced countries. Moreover Europe is currently at the cutting edge of a dramatic change in technology where the science, as a genuine vibrant part of higher education, pushes forward, towards new developments. This explains our focus on the quality in doctoral studies, research and innovations.

This morning session will be focused on doctoral studies including:

- Evaluation of procedures and logistics of doctoral studies in the Region including the role of mentors and follow up committees, involvement of senate and other bodies etc.
- A quest for quality of doctoral studies beyond established views, including creation of an effective external examiner system for doctoral studies
- Launching joint doctoral programmes in interdisciplinary fields which are at the forefront of EU programmes and policies.

At the afternoon the focus will be on the cooperation in strengthening policy in research and innovation in the Region including

- creation of web-based catalogue and opening access to the major research equipment from across the Region
- exploring instruments for fostering collaboration between regional scientists and enhancement of mobility of doctoral students and early career researchers
- discussing establishment of doctoral schools at universities in an intimate cooperation with prominent research institutes

At the meeting of the Platform Council which will take place on 17 June in the morning, the authorised representatives of the Platform members will discuss:

- Platform Action Plan for the period 2015 – 2018, based on the outcomes of the Summit Events
- operational modalities of the Platform Office in Dubrovnik including engagement of a University of Zagreb administrative staff to act as Platform Office administrator.

- amendments to the “Articles of Association” related to some adjustments and technical corrections

According to our practice, decision making process related to strategic issues will be carried out via electronic voting after the meeting, with all necessary written input documents available. This enables institutions participation at the meeting to have additional internal consultations before taking part in voting process.

Electronic voting with input documents available in advance also provides an additional opportunity for institutions whose representatives have been prevented to participate at the Platform Council meeting to take part in decision making process. Such a decision making process fully respects the autonomy of participating institutions, authorities and organisations, within a transparent and collective endeavour to advance common goals.

Although we are flexible concerning the choice of meeting languages, providing that all participants have equal opportunity take part in discussions, the official language of the Platform is English and therefore all crucial documents shall be available in English. Since the Platform has a number of higher education authorities aboard, I am confident that if necessary, they will provide assistance in translating some of documents to other regional languages which could eventually provide an opportunity for large number of stakeholders in the Region to have access to these documents.

Digest of the Participants' Addresses

Mr. Vladimir Bumbaširević, Rector, University of Belgrade

The issue of doctoral studies, which is in the focus of Novi Sad events, is also of key interest of EUA since Salzburg meeting and provides genuine connection between European Higher Education Area and European Research Area.

We very much look forward to a closer cooperation in doctoral studies within the Platform including broader involvement of external experts on a voluntary basis.

We support creation of a 'pool of external examiners' for doctoral studies and establishment of a working group to set-up necessary standards for various academic fields. In this context it would be important to collate information on procedures and logistic of doctoral studies across the Region.

For rather small countries engagement of 'external cross border members in dissertation committees' would certainly improve the quality of doctoral studies and would provide a broader perspective.

There is interplay between the issue of doctoral studies and that of cataloguing major research equipment in the region. Process of mapping of research capacities would maximise the use of equipment assets and prevent unnecessary expenditure on new equipment where appropriate facilities are already available.

Mr. Damir Boras, Rector, University of Zagreb:

There are no substantial language barriers between us, which could prevent cooperation. We are as strong as our cooperation is effective.

I am pleased that questions related to doctoral studies have been so comprehensively raised within the Platform.

The exchange of experts in various fields could solve many problems including those related to finding competent members of committees for evaluation of projects and study programmes.

Creation of a circle of trust with participation of universities whose PhD diplomas can be trusted would remove diploma sellers from the market and impose high quality accreditation standards.

University of Zagreb would be happy to be act as the co-organisers of a meeting of Agencies for accreditation and quality assurance in Zagreb or Dubrovnik. We will provide accommodation.

Concerning the Platform Office I would like to ensure you all that University of Zagreb is going to provide premises for the Platform Office in the Centre for Advanced Academic Studies (CAAS) in Dubrovnik along with all necessary support.

I will issue special rectors decree to allow head of the Centre for Advanced Academic Studies in Dubrovnik to act as Platform Office administrator.

In order to avoid possible problems in complying with Croatian taxation system, the University of Zagreb will not consume the amount of 10.000 EUR received from the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) for the establishment of the Platform Office and will engage its own resources instead.

Mr. Ivan Svetlik, Rector, University of Ljubljana

University of Ljubljana strongly supports Regional Platform with some expectations about its efficiency and ability to initiate strategic debates in various fields including doctoral studies.

We shall exchange our experiences in the course of establishment of efficient doctoral studies and creation of 'Quality Code in Doctoral studies'.

Various benchmark solutions, including those related to procedures and logistic of doctoral studies, should be developed in due course. Exchange of good practice in general, would be provide benefit for all.

Creation of "Code of Practice" would allow doctoral students and early career researchers involved in mobility within the Region to understand better the research environment of the host institution.

Special working group could be launched within the Platform, aiming to develop feasible solutions for joint programme, double degree programme and comparable programmes.

Proposal related to the engagement of 'external cross border members in dissertation committees' and creation of a 'pool of external examiners', sounds great.

Launching join doctoral studies in the Region could start with interdisciplinary area such as the field of energy which covers most of science, engineering, social sciences, environmental science etc.

It could be a good idea to initiate a strong cooperation between higher education authorities with responsibility for quality control, under the scheme of Regional Platform. This cooperation would certainly benefit all of us.

Concerning the cataloguing of equipment, we should define terms of reference and protocols defining the way in which the access to particular capital equipment can be realised.

We ought to have precise plans, persons responsible for coordination of activities, deadlines for preparing projects.

Our Platform still is not recognised enough. Important question is how to raise money to support activities we envisaged in our action plan.

Mr. Viktor Nedović, Assistant Minister, Ministry of education, Science and Technological Development, Serbia

The Platform has valuable goals and has to take advantage of various funding networks and programmes.

At the moment we are not visible enough on the European map because of lack of substantial research infrastructure. Sufficiently well developed infrastructure could attract young researcher to the Region and help in reversing process of research emigration.

There is initiative aiming to enhance participation of WB countries in research funds. A special working group has been established to promote better inclusion. We should work hard on this issue of getting more funding and attracting more young researchers.

Mr. Nedović has brought to the participants' attention existing networks related to research and innovation (two power point presentations: The Framework for Western Balkans Research and Innovation Facility and European Union Strategy for Danube Region) and advised Regional Platform to communicate with these networks.

Ms. Radmila Vojvodić, Rector, University of Montenegro, Podgorica:

We have common interest in the Region and cooperation in the Platform could help in solving problems in a practical and sensible way.

Quality has many facets and increasingly becomes a controversial issue. From one side we have national QA agencies and Commissions fostering European vision of quality culture and on the other side in some parts of the Region we are facing a mushrooming of private for-profit institutions and hyper production of diplomas with questionable quality. Platform should address these issues as well.

I wonder whether we should provide some recommendations on how to delegate persons who have to participate in Platform working groups devoted to doctoral studies and its quality.

I also wonder if we have an ambition to set-up a regional centre for doctoral studies under the scheme of Regional Platform.

University leadership always faces hard talk with the academic community when implementation of agreed standards comes to agenda, including eligibility of potential mentors involved in doctoral studies.

We at the University of Montenegro intend to push forward interdisciplinary studies through our centre for doctoral studies. We particularly plan to encourage interdisciplinary studies like energy, marine biology and agriculture.

Mr. Zlatko Žoglev, Rector, University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bitola

We should start with cooperation in doctoral studies and try to harmonise some procedures aiming to help students involved in mobility and improve situation on the ground.

I also support the idea of establishing regional research centre.

Concerning the cooperation of agencies, a meeting of agencies in Zagreb is a very good idea and could be productive. The only problem I can see is that agencies do not always behave as independent institutions, either because of direct political influence or because of lack of personal integrities of the staff.

Our conclusions have to be issued in a form of declaration expressing our collective commitment to enhance quality standards. This declaration has to be brought to the attention of higher education authorities.

Ms. Emilija Janevik, Vice-Rector, Goce Delcev University, Štip:

Our University is rather young, exists only 8 years. Therefore it is very important for us to be involved in Regional cooperation in order to be able to improve quality.

We have cooperation via Erasmus programme with a number of institutions, but unfortunately not with those within Macedonia and not from the Region. We should intensify our cooperation within the Region.

Cataloguing of capital equipment would prevent unnecessary expenditure on new equipment where appropriate facilities are already available.

We would be happy to be a host of a Platform event and invite representatives of Platform members to visit our University

Mr. Draško Marinković, Vice-Rector University of Banja Luka:

We are still young University, about 40 years only, and we are honoured to have opportunity to participate in the Platform.

We very much support process of raising standards in doctoral studies. That could be an efficient vehicle for addressing the problem of dodgy profit non-state universities with the power to award PhD.

At the University of Banja Luka we are facing problem of loosing students' market as a result of raising quality. We see the Platform as a tool capable to provide assistance in solving this problem.

Mr. Pavle Sekeruš, Vice-Rector, University of Novi Sad:

Agencies/Commissions for Accreditation and Quality Assurance have been launched to defend quality. Unfortunately, it does not functioning well.

It is important to enhance mobility of good teachers at doctoral level within the Region and create elite doctoral programmes or programmes of excellence, under the umbrella of Regional Platform.

Double mentoring is one of instruments which provides access to the capital equipment and moreover involves complimentary skills and shared values.

Ms. Ivana Čuković Bagić, Vice-Rector, University of Zagreb:

Study programmes and quality management belong to my responsibilities as Vice-Rector at the University of Zagreb.

Both activities envisaged to be coordinated from the Platform (report on the procedures and logistic of doctoral studies and external examiner system for doctoral studies), have quality on its core.

Mr. Husein Nanić, Director, Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance:

The Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance has recently completed a project devoted to accreditation standards for the third cycle programmes and all facts and analysis are now available.

In B&H we have huge challenge in bringing the quality of doctoral studies at the acceptable level. One of the B&H universities, founded only few years ago, already awarded more than 200 PhD degrees. This explains why some of our diplomas are not recognised abroad. Platform could provide a proper forum for addressing these issues.

The questions we are raising here in the Platform are not yet subject of cooperation of institutions with responsibility for quality in the Region and therefore we welcome very much Zagreb meeting of agencies/commissions for accreditation and quality assurance. We believe that inclusion of those who have decision making power at national level could enhance chance of the Platform to make visible changes.

Mr. Mirko Stopar, Director General, Directorate for Higher Education, Ministry of Slovenia

We have to remove obstacles for mobility of both, mentors and PhD students and find acceptable solution for the existing problems or difficulties in order to have close and effective cooperation in the Region.

Ms. Darinka Vrečko, Higher Education Sector, Slovenian Ministry

At the end of previous year ministries from the Region have responded to the call for Bologna promoters. Within this call Slovenia has been granted with a small project to support strengthening of Bologna process in Slovenia including organisation of two events with participation of 10 representatives from WB:

- Strategy for internationalisation of higher education
- Quality of teaching and learning in education

We will invite 10 representatives from the Platform to participate to these events.

Mr. Stane Pejovnik, President, Platform Council

I agree that there are no rationale obstacles for cooperation in the Region. Still, such cooperation is far from being sufficient. The Region suffers from excessive emigration of intelligent, well-educated individuals to somewhere for better pay or research conditions. At the same time the reverse process, including arrival of doctoral students from abroad is rather slow.

For more substantial prospective cooperation in the field of doctoral studies we need to have in place a pool of Regional experts along with a deep insight in the procedures for doctoral studies within partners' institutions (the devil is always in details).

In the course of promoting and enhancing better mobility of doctoral students and early career researchers within the Region, we could start with partial agreements for each student or researcher involved in mobility, aiming to reach eventually a global agreement.

We agreed to initiate cataloguing of capital research equipment for which an open access for regional doctoral students could be immediately granted. The other equipment, e.g. those for which such access would require more restrictive approach, could be processed in a later stage. I would suggest inviting the Institute of Information Science Maribor (IZUM), to create an embryo of such catalogue. In the first stage access to the catalogue will be offered to the Platform members only.

Neither of countries participating in the Platform can afford procurement of expensive equipment by itself. When we create catalogue and people establish contacts, cooperation will speed-up creating environment for joint procurement of capital equipment.

Bringing institutes closer to the doctoral studies is a rather delicate process, involving hard negotiations inside university and between university and the institutes, but this is ultimately inevitable.

Energy increasingly becomes a critical resource and the initiative of launching a joint doctoral programme in the field of energy is a good proposal.

New Europe is an extremely complex structure. In this context it would be much easier to get support from Brussels if Region manages to speak-up with one 'collective voice'.

Cooperation of agencies on the issues related to the quality of doctoral studies shall be included in the action plan. University of Zagreb has kindly offered to co-organise such meeting together with Croatian Agency in Zagreb or Dubrovnik at the end of 2015.

Platform intends to initiate regional meeting of ministers to launch policy level of cooperation. Rector Svetlik and I will invite Slovenian Ministry to act as a host of such a meeting and provide formal invitations to other ministers. It is feasible to have such summit event in Ljubljana in 2016. This Ministerial meeting will be included in the Platform Action Plan.

Concerning the membership fee, for now we stand by our decision made in Ljubljana not to introduce any formal financial obligation. Platform members already contribute to the Platform by covering part of their expenses (in case of this Novi Sad events travel costs only).

Mr. Ladislav Novak. Platform Coordinator

It is my pleasure to inform you that EUA has confirmed participation in the Platform Advisory Board. Doctoral studies are in the focus of EUA activities since 2005 and therefore we will invite EUA to provide assistance and eventually coordinate activities related to drafting of Regional Code of Practice in Doctoral Studies, through its representative in the Advisory Board.

Platform is registered as a legal entity in Croatia with permanent office in Dubrovnik, and is fully eligible to apply to all funding programmes for which Croatia is eligible. Moreover Regional Platform is registered on the EU Participants Portal and already got PIC (Participant Identification Code) number, meaning that Regional Platform could apply on behalf of all Platform members for Erasmus+ funding.

We would also like to encourage Platform members that belong to the group of partner countries for Erasmus+ programme, to directly apply for EU funding as well, providing that Platform is included as a partner in such a project.

The office in Dubrovnik, which is still in construction, will be a focal point of Platform activities and will act as a hub aiming to connect together various initiatives. Dubrovnik itself has a seducing charm and is a perfect place for organising various events.

The Platform Office operates in a close relationship with the University of Zagreb since it is situated in the Centre for Advanced Academic Studies (CAAS) of the University of Zagreb in Dubrovnik and the administrator of the Office is a member of the University of Zagreb staff. This relationship between Platform Office and the University of Zagreb is similar to that of Office of Magna Charta Observatory and the University of Bologna.

At the same time the Platform is an independent legal entity and according to article 5.1 of the Articles of Association, the relationship between the Platform and the University of Zagreb shall be regulated via "Agreement on the operational modalities of the Platform Office". This agreement has to be adopted by the Platform Council and the Senate of the University of Zagreb.

Platform members or affiliates are institutions (universities, higher education authorities and parliamentary committees). Universities are normally represented by their leadership (rectors and/or vice-rectors). Senior representatives of higher education authorities and parliamentary committees (ministers, deputy ministers, assistant ministers, state secretaries, heads/directors of higher education/research sectors as well as head or directors, deputy heads or directors of agencies, presidents and/or vice-presidents of parliamentary committees) represent respective institution by defaults. Besides, higher education authorities and parliamentary committees ought to have authorised representatives in the Platform who will also act as contact persons. Each member has to decide about its representative in the Platform including write to replace it or to send a substitute.

Members of the Platform leadership (President and Vice-President of Council, Chairperson of the Executive Board and Platform Coordinator) are appointed by the Platform Council. They serve Platform in their personal capacity and they are not representatives of institutions. Removal from the post of any member of the Platform leadership requires the same procedure as the one used for elections. Platform leadership and representatives of Platform members or affiliates are obliged to maintain an effective mutual communication.

President of the Council and the Coordinator are professional Platform positions. Candidate for the President of the Council shall be a person formerly holding senior positions at the university management (rector or vice-rector) and the Coordinator of the Platform shall be a person who has experience and international reputation in higher education and research policy issues (Article 4.3.4 of the Articles of Association). Candidate for the Vice-President of the Platform Council shall be a person who currently holds senior position at a higher education authority while Chairperson of the Executive Board shall be a person who has or had senior university position and has capacity to manage the operations of the Regional Office under the Croatian law.

Closing addresses

Mr. Damir Boras, Rector, University of Zagreb

We had fruitful meetings. I am very much pleased with having an opportunity to meet you and to work with you. I look forward to meeting you in Zagreb late this year on the occasion of event gathering agencies/commissions for accreditation and quality assurance.

Mr. Ivan Svetlik, Rector, University of Ljubljana

Let me thank to the organisers of these meetings. All went well and has been beautifully organised.

Prof. Vladimir Bumbaširević, Rector, University of Belgrade

I joined Platform in Ljubljana on the occasion of first meeting the Platform Council. Platform is developing well and I would like to thank for very good organisation of these meetings.

Mr. Mirko Stopar, Director General, Directorate for Higher Education, Ministry of Slovenia

It was my pleasure to participate at these Platform events. I will inform Madam Minister on the conclusions and reach impressions of these events and will forward to her the invitation made to the Slovenian Ministry to act as a host of a meeting on the ministerial level in Ljubljana, in cooperation with the Platform.

Ms. Radmila Vojvodić, Rector, University of Montenegro, Podgorica:

I also would like to express my great pleasure for having opportunity to participate at these well organised events. I take this opportunity to invite Platform leadership to define a theme for a meeting to be hosted by University of Montenegro.

Ms. Emilija Janevik, Vice-Rector, Goce Delcev University, Štip:

On behalf of Goce Delcev University I would like to thank to the organisers for their efforts. We would be happy to act as host of a Platform future event and I have pleasure to invite you all to visit our University.

Mr. Pavle Sekeruš, Vice-Rector, University of Novi Sad:

University of Novi Sad is currently in an interregnum period where previous rector moved to a new post in Brussels while the newly elected rector is still not in the office. Therefore we are grateful to prof. Novak for all his kind efforts related to the organisation of these events on behalf of our University.

Mr. Husein Nanić, Director, Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance:

I would also like to express my great pleasure for taking part in these events. For our Agency participation in the Platform is an important international activity and for this participation we got approval at the highest level, which is the Presidency of the Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It would be important to have University of Sarajevo aboard as well and I will contact prof. Muharem Avdispahić and suggest him to reconsider decision of the University of Sarajevo to decline Platform invitation for membership.

Mr. Stane Pejovnik, President, Platform Council

I fully agree that accession of the University of Sarajevo to the Platform would be important. I wish you all safe trip back home and look forward to meeting you all on the next occasion.

Mr. Ladislav Novak, Platform Coordinator

We would need couple of weeks to prepare first draft of Minutes, Conclusions, Action Plan and amendments to the Articles of Association. These documents will be sent to all participants with defined deadline for comments and suggestions.

The initiative of having meeting of agencies/commissions with responsibility in quality assurance in Zagreb or Dubrovnik under the scheme of Regional Platform, as kindly proposed by prof. Boras, has been warmly accepted by all participants. Meeting will be co-organised by Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education and University of Zagreb

We also envisaged in 2016 organisation of ministerial conference under the scheme of Regional Platform to raise political support. Slovenian members of the Platform kindly agreed to forward the invitation for organisation of this ministerial conference to the Slovenian Minister of Education, Science and Sport. For such a move we need full consent of Madam Minister of the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

Concerning the follow-up electronic communication, we suggest 10 days deadline for comments and suggestions concerning Minutes, Conclusions, Action Plan and amendments to the Articles of Association. After receiving responses and inclusion of these comments and suggestions to the respective Platform documents, the revised versions will be sent for approval to all members including those whose representatives were prevented to participate at the Novi Sad events. Not responding within proposed deadline in another 10 days will be considered as an approval.

This is also to thank you all for the most fruitful discussions we had last two days and strong commitment to the Platform cause, showing at the same time great sense for reality.

Looking forward to your responses to the Minutes, Conclusions, Action Plan and amendments to the Articles of Association, I wish you also safe trip back.

Conclusions

0. The participants of the Novi Sad events, organised on 15-17 June 2015 under the scheme of Regional Platform are united by their commitment to make effective benchmarking and cooperation in higher education and research a reality in the Region through European, regional, national and local policy and action.

1. The participants of the Novi Sad events agree to focus Platform activities for the period 2015-2018 to the advancement of quality of doctoral studies and doctoral degrees beyond existing thresholds including concentration of research and teaching capacities in the Region and enhancement of mobility of doctoral students and early career researchers within the Region.

2. The participants of the Novi Sad events pledge for a realistic approaches with initiation of a chain of feasible steps in order to ensure visible impact in the proposed period. These steps will be supported by project activities and establishment of a number of working groups aiming to:

Evaluate procedures, logistic and standards of doctoral studies in the Region and issue Code of Practice in Doctoral Studies and Quality Code of Doctoral Degree.

Enhance quality of doctoral studies and doctoral degrees beyond established views through initiating an interuniversity quality incubator along with an external examiner system in doctoral studies.

Launch regional doctoral programme(s) of excellence in interdisciplinary fields paving the way for Regional doctoral school of excellence.

Create an interactive web catalogue to keep track of capital equipment assets and research human resources in the Region.

Explore instruments for enhancing mobility of doctoral students and early career researchers and collaboration of researchers within the Region.

Organise in late autumn 2015 a regional conference on practice and quality standards in doctoral studies and doctoral degrees, hosted by the University of Zagreb.

Initiate in 2016 a ministerial conference in Ljubljana, hosted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport Slovenia.

Organise in 2017 an interim conference on the state of the art of the realisation of activities envisaged for 2015-2018, including fine tuning of the Action Plan 2015-2018 and drafting of an outline of the Plan for 2019-2022 at the University of Montenegro,

3. The participants of the Novi Sad events expect that all envisaged activities ought to have precise plans, defined responsibilities for coordination of working groups and deadlines for preparation of projects. They also agree that securing funds for sustainable operation of the Platform Office and Platform activities would be one of key priorities for 2015 and 2016.

4. The participants have expressed their concern on the massive mushrooming of private for-profit institutions in the Region and hyper production of doctoral diplomas of questionable quality. The participants agree that Platform should address these issues as well.

5. The participants of the Novi Sad events welcome the assurance provided by prof. Damir Boras that University of Zagreb will make it available premises for the Platform Office in the Centre for Advanced Academic Studies (CAAS) in Dubrovnik along with all necessary support. The participants also welcome the announcement of prof. Boras to issue a Rector's decree allowing a member of the University of Zagreb staff working at the Centre for Advanced Academic Studies (CAAS) in Dubrovnik, to act as an administrator of the Platform Office. According to the Articles of Association, terms of reference on the operational modalities of the Platform Office shall be set out in a formal document (agreement), to be adopted by the Council of the Platform and the Senate of the University of Zagreb.

Outline of the Platform Action Plan 2015-2018

Having regarded to the strategic Platform aims stated in the Articles of Association:

1. *foster* a Regional 'collective voice' in higher education and research that resonates regionally, nationally and internationally;
2. *enable* strategic level debate in the Region on higher education and research issues which will impact its development;
3. *promote* regional policy and collaborative solutions in higher education and research;
4. *develop* benchmark solutions for higher education quality issues and mutual trust in the recognition of qualifications;
5. *provide* bespoke professional development opportunities for managers, administrators and policy-makers from higher education institutions and authorities in the Region;
6. *encourage* further cooperation in doctoral studies, research and innovation and exchange of doctoral students and early career researchers within the Region;
7. *enhance* public understanding of the underlying principles set out in EU policies in higher education and research since 2000;
8. *contribute* to the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, South East Europe 2020 Strategy and new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020);
9. *give* active support and guidance to members of the Platform in their development in higher education and research,

the following activities have been envisaged for the period 2015-2018

Activity 1 (Drafting Code of Practice in Doctoral Studies and Quality Code of Doctoral Degrees)

This activity is aiming to promote quality standards of doctoral studies and doctoral degree beyond existing thresholds established by national quality assurance authorities. These standards can be seen as a part of an interuniversity self regulation (those universities that agree to adopt Quality Code) aiming to take collective responsibility in advancing quality of doctoral degree.

Activity 2 (Establishing Circle of Trust in Doctoral Degree, Pool of International Experts and External Examiner System in Doctoral Studies)

Code of Practice and Quality Code standards established within the Activity 1 are to pave a path for establishment of an interuniversity structure aiming to ensure substantial advances in quality of doctoral studies and doctoral degree across the Region, beyond established views. This presumes establishment of a 'Circle of Trust in Doctoral Degree' and related instruments including 'Pool of International Experts' and 'External Examiner System in Doctoral Studies'.

Activity 3 (Concentrating research and teaching capacities in the Region for doctoral studies)

This activity, is aiming to explore feasible solutions in the course of concentrating best research capacities within the Region, including human resources and capital research equipment, in order to make regional doctoral programmes competitive on the European scene. The main outcome of this activity would be an interactive catalogue of research capacities in the Region and a number of regional doctoral programmes of excellence.

Activity 4 (Exploring internal financial resources for fostering regional mobility)

A working group comprised of representatives of ministries with responsibility for science and technology, leaders of well established research groups and coordinators of capital EU funded research projects, will explore internal financial resources for fostering collaboration between regional scientists and enhancement of mobility of doctoral students and early career researchers.

Activity 5 (Initiating Regional ministerial conference to be held in Ljubljana in 2016)

Regional ministerial conference involving national authorities with responsibility in higher education, science and technological development from the Region will be organised in Ljubljana in 2016 and hosted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport Slovenia, under the scheme of Regional Platform. The Conference is aiming to initiate strategic level debate in the Region on higher education and research issues which will impact to its development.

Activity 6 (Organising Summing-up and Foresight 2022 Conference in Podgorica in 2017)

A conference, organised at the University of Montenegro under the scheme of the Regional Platform aiming discuss Interim Report on the outcomes of the activities envisaged for 2015-2018, will take place in Podgorica in autumn 2017. This conference will provide an opportunity for making last minute fine tuning of the Action Plan 2015-2018 and creation of an outline of the Plan for 2019-2022.

Proposal for the amendments to the Articles of Association

Apart from some small adjustments in the text, the following changes have been proposed:

- In the 'History of the Document' few lines are included saying that Platform has been registered in Croatia on 3 Sept 2014 and that we agreed on 17 June 2015 at the Meeting of Platform Council to introduce necessary amendments to the Article of Association.
- Apart from EHEA, ERA (European Research Area) is mentioned in the 'Preamble' as well.
- In the Article 1, the term Region is described by listing countries participating in the Platform.
- In the Article 2, few necessary adjustments have been made to ensure compliance with the conclusion of Ljubljana meeting and to ensure that Articles of Association will be valid in the future if new EU policies occur.
- In the Article 3, necessary changes are made to provide clear distinction between members, affiliates and founders of the Platform.
- Everywhere in the text 'Secretariat' is substituted by 'Platform Office' and 'Head of Regional Office' is substituted by 'Platform Office Administrator'.
- In articles 4.1.2 the prerequisites for launching an electronic session of the Platform Council are relaxed.
- In the Article 4.1.4 few adjustments were made to define precisely terms of reference for the positions of President and Vice-President of the Council.
- Executive Board has 4 members (Chairperson, President and Vice-President of the Council and Coordinator). President of the Council has 'casting vote'. Platform Office Administrator could be invited to join specific sessions of the Executive Board, without voting rights (Article 4.2.1)
- Coordinator by default coordinates activities of internal Platform Working Groups and participate in the external Regional Working Groups (Article 4.3.4)
- Article 5 is rearranged to include two sub-articles only, one related to Platform office premises and another to the Platform Office Administrator.

In Novi Sad, 17 June 2015

Rapporteur:

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Coordinator of the Platform