



Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research

Platform Activity Plan 2015-2018

(in support to the strategic Platform tasks set in the Articles of Association)

Document history

Regional Platform Activity Plan has been introduced and widely discussed on the occasion of Andrevlje Meeting of the Platform Council on 15-17 June 2015 and follow up electronic communication. Final version has been adopted on 26-27 October on the occasion of the Zagreb events (Conference on Practice and Standards in Doctoral Studies and Quality of Doctoral Degrees and collocated Meeting of the Platform Council).

Activity 1 (Comparative Analysis of Practice and Standards 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.

Step 1: Comparative Analysis of Practice and Standards in Doctoral Studies in the Region

A small working group comprised of senior university representatives (vice-rectors for science and heads of university doctoral schools), established under the scheme of Regional Platform shall collate and review procedures, logistics and standards relating to doctoral studies within the Region.

Step 2: Quality Code of Doctoral Degrees

Based on the comparative analysis of practice and standards in doctoral studies in the Region drafted within Step 1 and various existing international reports (EUA, CoE, ENQA, ORPHEUS, QAA UK, etc) Platform working group shall draft first proposal for the **Quality Code of Doctoral Degrees**. This strategic Platform document shall be then widely discussed among the Platform members.

Step 3: Regional conference on practice and quality standards in doctoral studies and doctoral degrees to be held in Zagreb

The "Comparative Analysis of Practice and Standards in Doctoral Studies in the Region" and "Quality Code of Doctoral Degrees" will serve as input documents to the **Regional conference on practice and standards in doctoral studies and quality of doctoral degrees** to be organised at the University of Zagreb under the scheme of Regional Platform on 26 and 27 October 2015. The final version of the Quality Code of Doctoral Degrees will be widely discussed on the Conference and adopted on the meeting of Platform Council collocated to the Zagreb Conference.

Comment: In principle, quality standards of doctoral studies and doctoral degree established within the Platform shall be higher than those of national standards and by all means *not binding any of parties* participating on the Platform (universities or authorities involved in national quality assurance). *These standards can be seen as a part of an interuniversity self-regulation aiming to take collective responsibility in advancing quality of doctoral degree.*

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

Quality Code of Doctoral Degree established within the Activity 1 is 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 the existing thresholds. This presumes establishment of 'Circle of Trust in Doctoral Degree' and related instruments including 'Pool of International Experts' and 'External Examiner System in Doctoral Studies'.

Motivation: National agencies could not provide more than a threshold of the quality. A real quality can ensure and achieved only by interuniversity self regulation and benchmarking, providing targets against which performance can be measured and assessed by peer-groups from universities to which quality of doctoral degree can be trusted. It is an intriguing fact that governments have placed much more faith in market self regulation, than in professional academic self-regulation.

The **Circle of Trust Zone in Doctoral Degree** shall include universities which (a) already have doctoral programmes accredited by national higher education authorities for quality assurance (b) formally adopt Quality Code Standards for Doctoral Degrees or higher standards as a part of their internal regulations and (c) agree on the assessment of their procedures and standards by the external examiners (from other universities participating in the Circle of Trust Zone). Members of the Circle of Trust Zone will have an access to the **Pool of International Experts** from which 'external pre-reviewers', 'external mentors' and members of various committees related to doctoral studies can be recruited. In order to develop consistency of quality of doctoral degrees within the 'Circle of Trust' Zone' and to ensure implementation of agreed standards, an **External Examiner System in Doctoral Studies** will be established as an inherent part of the interuniversity structure.

A pathfinder working group shall be established under the scheme of Regional Platform with the aim to propose first draft of the **Terms of reference of the interuniversity structure**, including standards for admission in the 'Pool of International Experts' and guidance and procedures for 'External Examiner System in Doctoral Studies'. Establishment of a **fund to support activities of external examiner system in doctoral studies** will also be explored. The final version of the Terms of Reference of the interuniversity structure will be widely discussed and adopted at the meeting of the Platform Council to be organised in Dubrovnik in 2016 immediately before the Ministerial Conference in Ljubljana.

An *embryo of the interuniversity structure* which will include *initial pool of international experts* and *basic elements of external examiner system in doctoral studies* will be launched through trilateral agreements between University of Belgrade University of Ljubljana and University of Zagreb, aiming to provide basic instruments and initial opportunities for further advancements of the quality of doctoral degree across the Region including training of the regional external examiners.

Comment: Interuniversity structure will be established and run by universities with the full consent of national authorities with responsibility in higher education and science. *This is not be an exclusive club but rather regional quality incubator aiming to move quality away from existing threshold standards which in a number of countries failed to make difference between quality doctoral degrees and those that cannot be trusted.*

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. It also presumes **close involvement of top research institutes** in the course of **creation of regional doctoral studies of excellence**. This activity will be jointly co-coordinated by the University of Ljubljana and the University of Belgrade with the full consent of Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

The main outcomes include an **interactive catalogue of research capacities in the Region** and **a number of doctoral programmes of excellence** able to compete on the European scene for best funding and best students, as a joint initiative of universities and prominent research institutes.

Step 1: Cataloguing research capacities on local/national procedures

An interactive web platform will be launched as a vehicle for cataloguing capital research equipment and human research capacities in the Region. Each university participating on the Platform shall establish its own working group aiming to catalogue human research capacities and capital research equipment. Apart from universities, most of capital equipment is held at research institutes. Since research institutes are not (yet) embarked on the Platform, it would be important to have national authorities for science and technology involved in the local coordination of activity 3 in order to ensure a good insight in the research capacities at national level including those at research institutes. At the Regional level this activity will be coordinated by the University of Ljubljana in association with Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and chaired by the President of Platform Council. The University of Belgrade and Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development will provide close assistance to the University of Ljubljana and Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in this jointly coordinated activity.

Step 2: Regional Doctoral Programmes of Excellence

Regional working group coordinated by the University of Belgrade and co-coordinated by the University of Ljubljana, will explore legal and logistical issues in the course of creation of institutional solution for concentration of best research capacities of the Region with broad involvement of prominent research institutes. This institutional solution would lead to the launching of regional doctoral programmes of excellence with a perspective (2018 and beyond) of establishment of a Regional Doctoral School of excellence. These joint doctoral programmes developed under the scheme of Regional Platform will eventually extend market of doctoral students beyond the Region including EU neighbouring countries. It is expected that regional doctoral programmes of excellence will be eligible for EC funding. At the Andrejka meeting of the Platform Council in June 2015, participants already agreed that first two doctoral programmes to be developed under the scheme of Platform will be devoted to *energy* and *arts*.

Activity 4 (Exploring internal financial resources for fostering regional cooperation)*

A working group comprised of representatives of ministries with responsibility for science and technology, senior representatives of well established research groups and coordinators of capital EU funded research projects, will explore **internal financial resources for fostering regional cooperation** in research and technological development and enhancement of mobility of doctoral students and early career researchers. This working group will be *coordinated by prof. Viktor Nedović, Assistant Minister from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Serbia (to be confirmed)*.

The working group of the Activity 4 will also prepare a **proposal for the joint ministerial statement** on the commitment of the regional ministries with responsibility for science and technology to the advancement of cooperation in research and technological development. This joint statement is to be discussed and eventually adopted at Ljubljana ministerial conference to take place in 2017.

Activity 5 (Platform event: Regional ministerial conference to be held in Ljubljana in 2016)

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

Ministers from the Region will review strategic opportunities in supporting universities to **advance quality of doctoral studies** which could have impact on the further technological development of the Region and creation of regional doctoral programmes and doctoral schools of excellence (2018 and beyond).

Participants of the Conference will also explore possible joint commitment to advance benchmarking and cooperation in research and technological development and **enhance mobility within the Region** of doctoral students and early career researchers.

Ministers from the Region could also explore joint political will to **foster a 'collective regional voice'** in higher education and research, paving a path for creation of 'Regional Higher Education and Research Area'.

Activity 6 (Platform event: Interim Reporting Conference in Podgorica in 2017)

An interim conference with the aim to discuss **Interim Report on the outcomes of the activities envisaged for 2015-2018**, will be organised in Podgorica in autumn 2017 under the scheme of the Regional Platform adn hosted by the University of Montenegro. This conference will provide an opportunity for last minute **fine tuning of the Action Plan 2015-2018** and **creation of an outline of the Plan for 2019-2022**. Conference will gather representatives of universities, ministries, agencies/commissions for accreditation and quality assurance, prominent research institutes, parliamentary committees for education and research and members of the Advisory Board.

In particular the participants of the Conference will explore possibilities for sustainable, **long term funding of the Platform activities** for the next period of Platform plan (2018 and beyond).