



**Founding Document**  
of the  
**Regional<sup>1</sup> Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education**

Launched in Dubrovnik on 26 September 2012,  
On the occasion of “Regional Strategic Forum in Higher Education”,  
Under the scheme of EC funded STREW Tempus Project and Novi Sad Initiative,  
In cooperation with Higher Education Authority of Ireland, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education,  
and Regional Cooperation Council

<b>Document history</b>
Initial drafting prepared by Core Expert Group consisting of representatives of Higher Education Authority of Ireland, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, Dublin Institute of Technology, University of Stockholm, Middlesex University London, and University of Novi Sad.
First draft presented and discussed at Petrovac Conference in May 2012
Further drafting completed by the Core Expert Group of the STREW Tempus Project through bi-lateral meetings (August 18 <sup>th</sup> and 28 <sup>th</sup> ) and via electronic communication – August/September 2012.
Refinement and adoption by the full membership of the STREW consortium at the Regional Strategic Forum in Higher Education in Dubrovnik on 26 September 2012

*Having regard to* a decade of unprecedented higher education reform in Europe and the official launch of the European Higher Education Area

*Reaffirming* the rich and diverse regional academic heritage and clear democratic will of regional governments to work together in partnership, promoting the exchange of good practice,

*Considering* that universities recruit and serve in a global higher education environment, the importance of both the regional market and transnational bodies and agencies become paramount

*Underlining* the commitment of regional governments in advancing higher education in the Region through European, regional, national and local policy and action

*Being aware* that any effective advances in higher education should increasingly rely on benchmarked standards and exploitation of the strategic opportunities in the higher education sector

*Anticipating* that substantial change in the national strategic plans and collaborative actions, including institutionalised cross border solutions, are prerequisites for further advances in regional higher education

*Acknowledging the important contribution of* the project “Building Capacity for Structural Reform in Higher Education of Western Balkan Countries”, coordinated by the University of Novi Sad,

**We, representatives of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Higher Education Authorities (HEAs) from the Region**

Ministry of Education and Science, *Albania*  
Agency for Development of HE and QA, *B&H*  
Agency for Science and Higher Education, *Croatia*  
Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of *Macedonia*,  
Ministry of Education and Sports, *Montenegro*  
Ministry of Education and Science, *Serbia*

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<sup>1</sup> **Note 1:** At the moment we take the notion of “Region” in the generic sense to be defined more closely in due course.

University of *Banja Luka*  
University of *Belgrade*  
Aleksandër Moisiu University, *Durrës*  
University of *Ljubljana*  
University of *Mostar*  
University of *Novi Sad*  
University of Montenegro, *Podgorica*  
University of *Pristina* (located in Kosovska Mitrovica)  
University of *Sarajevo*  
University Goce Delčev, *Štip*  
University of *Tirana*  
University of *Zagreb*

### **In the presence of**

Regional Cooperation Council,  
Higher Education Authority of Ireland,  
Swedish National Agency for Higher Education,

Decide to establish the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education with the following general terms of reference:

#### Article 1 (membership)

Members of the Platform are HEIs and HEAs from the Region

#### Article 2 (mission)

The Platform shall

- *encourage strategic level debate* in the Region on higher education issues which will impact on its development
- *foster a Regional 'collective voice'* in higher education that resonates regionally, nationally and internationally
- *add value* to higher education in the Region by sharing good practice in higher education structural reform
- *develop benchmark solutions* for higher education quality issues
- *initiate regional discussions* for exploitation of the strategic opportunities facing the higher education sector
- *promote regional policy* and collaborative solutions in higher education
- *enhance strong partnerships* in higher education in the Region

#### Article 3 (governance)

- The *Presidency* of the Regional Platform is comprised of the President and the two Vice-Presidents (one representing HEIs and one representing HEAs). The President holds office for two years and is not eligible for re-election. The Vice-Presidents deputise for the President in his or her absence. The institution holding presidency provides communications among the members of the Platform.
- The *Board* of the Regional Platform is comprised of the current and former presidency (6 persons). The Board meets at least once a year.
- The *Council* of the Regional Platform is comprised of the nominated representatives of all members of the Regional Platform and nominated representatives of international organisations. The Council meets at least once in two years to elect new presidency and to adopt strategy and action plans:

**We, representatives of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Higher Education Authorities (HEAs)** from the Region agree to

- make the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education a reality, through collaborative solutions and strong partnerships in the Region
- bring this initiative to the attention of European Commission, UNESCO, Regional Cooperation Council, Central European Initiative, European University Association and International Association of Universities, etc.

We express agreement on the strategic goals of the Regional Platform for Cooperation and Benchmarking in Higher Education in the Western Balkans including:

- advances in the professionalization of public governance, management and administration of higher education;
- exploration of emerging innovative concepts of teaching and learning by facilitating collaborative action and sharing of good practice in higher education;
- development of new collaborative approaches in enhancing internal quality including the introduction of an external examiner system,

We entrust the Regional Platform to:

- develop the Regional Roadmap for the development and promotion of the regional policy in higher education, enhancing structural reform in higher education sector in the Western Balkans,
- adopt key priority themes which will be regularly refreshed as the priorities of the region evolve in the future, offering the potential to transform the higher education in the Region
- use the Open Method of Coordination developed within the educational and social arena of EU policy with a view to fully respect the sovereignty of participating countries, institutions and authorities within a transparent and collective endeavour to advance towards achieving the common goals,

We emphasise the importance of the regional Platform in serving as a forum through which higher education systems of the region can become more firmly engaged with the overall development of communities and societies in the Region,

We initiate the establishment of Regional Higher Education Experts Network within the Platform with the aim of bringing specific expertise and management capacity closer to those who make strategic decisions in higher education issues,

Recognising the benefit of regular exchange of information concerning the trends in higher education reform in the Region and the importance of involvement of a wider cross section of the stakeholders in the process of reform we anticipate launching a Regional annual conference rotating to different cities within the Region

Convinced that Bucharest Communiqué has committed participating countries to move away from individual to system-based recognition, we recognise the necessity to pave the way for the long term goal of establishing the Regional Area of Recognition including (see Appendix 1),

We welcome the proposal that the Regional Platform develops and implements an External Examiner system within the Higher Education Institutions in the Region in order to enhance the quality of provisions within the sector (see Appendix 2),

We invite HEAs and HEIs from the Region to join the Platform and to participate in establishing effective cross border and inter-institutional Instruments for benchmarking, building on the tools of the Bologna framework,

Aware of the an additional document with details on the governing mechanism, voting procedures, logistic issues, funding, action plan, etc, will be issued by the *Council* of Regional Platform, with the full consent of all members of the Platform.

## Appendices

Appendix 1: Setting up fast track for recognition of qualifications and paving the way for Regional Area of Recognition (RAR) of comparable academic degrees

Appendix 2: Developing consistency of quality in higher education programmes in the WB area: a proposal for introducing external examiners for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle programmes

### Appendix 1

#### **Setting up a fast track for recognition of qualifications and paving the way for Regional Area of Recognition of comparable academic degrees**

Stojan Sorčan, Member of the Pathfinder Group  
Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Slovenia

The Bucharest Communiqué on Consolidating the European Higher Education Area (2012) pointed out an important statement which requires comprehensive international and regional cooperation in order to establish mutual trust to achieving the long-term goal of automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees. Ministers on higher educations in countries of European Higher Education Area declared in Bucharest: “We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. We therefore commit to reviewing our national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices, as well as encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance.”

At present, academic recognition is almost always based on assessment of individual degrees. A shift to acceptance of qualifications at system level is required (in effect, that a bachelor degree – level 6 EQF – and a master degree – level 7 EQF – from a country in the European Higher Education Area will be considered for entry to a programme of further study in any other EHEA country). While not cutting across the autonomy of institutions to make decisions about admitting individual students, this will nonetheless require a change in practice, a change in policy attitudes, and a change in culture across higher education institutions. One of the challenges is getting the right balance between the autonomy of higher education institutions and the system as a whole, while maintaining quality assurance.

Countries of Western Balkan Region have a great opportunity to establish broader initiative for creating the Regional Area of Recognition of comparable academic degrees. Intensive cooperation between countries of Western Balkan Region on long term goal of European Higher Education Area on automatic recognition shall give us new possibilities for setting up a track to recognising each other's qualifications. The work should acknowledge but not be limited by the Lisbon Recognition Convention on Qualifications concerning Higher Education. There are many Bologna tools for assisting automatic recognition (e.g. peer review of self-certified qualification frameworks; quality assurance for assessing institutional recognition practices, joint degrees, ECTS, Diploma Supplement, European Area of Recognition Manual etc.) as well as already established Regional networks of national ENIC-NARIC centres.

The aim of the cooperation between the countries of Western Balkan Region is to promote and show others how and what is possible amongst the participating countries in terms of Automatic Recognition, exchange of good practices between region and broader, work on individual disciplines around which to organise a first phase of automatic recognition, organise meeting and seminars. The countries will closely cooperate with Pathfinder group on automatic recognition which has been established by Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG), members of BFUG and members of ENIC-NARIC centres in region. The countries will be action-oriented and will try to put into practice some concrete steps to achieve automatic recognition for comparable academic degrees.

## Appendix 2

### Developing consistency of quality in higher education programmes in the WB area: a proposal for introducing external examiners for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle programmes

Mike Dawney, Middlesex University, London, UK

#### The external examiner system

The use of external examiners has been a central feature of Higher Education in the UK since 1832, when the University of Durham was founded with the condition that the assessment of students was overseen by examiners from one of the two existing Universities (Oxford and Cambridge) to assure students and the public that the quality and value of degrees at the new University would be comparable. As more universities were established, the principle of external examining was maintained and remains in place today as an essential feature of quality assurance in the UK, and in those countries that have adopted the process. These include countries that developed a University system based closely on that of the UK (New Zealand, Canada etc) and more recent adoptees such as Denmark.

#### **Examinations**

*All examinations at Danish higher education institutions are administered not only by the teacher, but also by an examiner who, in the case of many examinations including the final project, must be external. The external examiners are responsible for assuring the same standard for all examinations and thus for their quality.*

<http://en.iu.dk/education-in-denmark/detailed-information/quality-assurance/quality-assurance>

The basis of the external examiner system is that an examiner who is from another University or similar level institution is appointed to the examination board of each programme (or possibly a group of similar programmes) at 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle levels. The role may vary but has certain central principles including the following:

- the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in other higher education institutions
- whether the academic standards set for its awards, or part thereof, are appropriate
- the extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance
- the assessment of standards of student performance in the programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine

These matters and others are the subject of an annual report to the University (to the Rector and Head of Quality Assurance). External examiner reports form part of the external review by national (or supranational eg ENQA) Quality Agencies and thus contribute significant evidence to national quality assurance. As external examiners are also requested to report on examples of good practice in assessment, the process also contributes to quality enhancement.

External examining is a peer-review and support process. It is not dependent on the seniority of the external examiner, but relies on the external examiner having significant (and current or recent) experience of assessment on programmes having similar content and level. While the external examiner may not formally have the power to change the marks obtained by students, recommendations may be made about the level of assessment and the grades given. In practice, the assessment board will address issues of divergence of marks between the internal and external examiners, and the external examiner's view may be given precedence.

The UK QAA code of practice on external examining may be consulted here:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quality%20Code%20-%20Chapter%20B7.pdf>

With large numbers of students on university programmes, particularly at first cycle level, the external examiner role is one of monitoring and sampling, but will always involve consultation over the assessment tasks set (examination papers, for example) and participation in the assessment board meetings at which student grades are approved and awards made. Participation in second cycle awards may involve a more extensive examining role, and at 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle doctoral award, the external examiner is a full examiner and assesses the whole of the work submitted alongside internal examiners.

External examiners in the UK and Denmark are normally, but not exclusively, appointed from the HEIs within the country concerned. This may not be a requirement and provided the external examiner has appropriate assessment experience, they may be appointed from a university in another country, or even from a research institute or professional body. As universities within the EHEA converge with the use of external reference points, including subject benchmarks, level and subject descriptors, the work of the Tuning project and other similar pan-European actions and agencies, there could be an expectation that the work of the EHEA could be greatly assisted by the use of cross-border external examiners to develop further consistency of practice across the Area.

### **External examiners for Universities in the West Balkan Region**

It is proposed that, in order to support, enhance and make transparent the quality of Higher Education across the Region, all Higher Education participants in the Regional Platform move to develop and implement an External Examiner system within the Region's HEIs to support and enhance the quality of provision within the sector. This development will have 3 phases, following a pilot phase, in which training within and between universities will take place:

- Phase 0 – Pilot phase. Under the auspices of STREW, 5 Universities, one from each of the WB countries, will appoint an external examiner for each of two programme areas /subjects, chosen by the University. The external examiners will be experienced examiners in their own subjects. Each participating University in the Pilot Phase will appoint their examiners from different countries within the Platform group. In the Pilot phase, the STREW project could cover expenses of the external examiners from the universities that participate in the STREW Consortium only. In the later phases, funding will be sought from international sources to assist with the expenses of external examiners from all members of the Platform group. The appointed external examiners will benefit from mentoring in and/or observation of external examiner practice in the UK, Sweden or Ireland. They will be expected to act as external examiners for at least one first cycle and one second cycle programme.

Following the pilot phase, and a critical evaluation, universities across the Region will begin the process of introducing external examiners across the sector.

- Phase 1. Each University/HEI will appoint an external examiner for at least two first cycle programmes per Faculty during the academic year 2013-14. These appointments should be in place by October 2013 and will take part in the assessment process for the award of degrees in Summer 2014. Each University may, at the same time, appoint an External Assessment Mentor, with experience of external examining, who will provide guidance and support for the new external examiners. External examiners may be appointed from any University/HEI within or outside the Region, though preference should be given to appointments within the Region in order to develop expertise. External examiners would normally receive an annual fee and payment of expenses and would be appointed normally for a three year term.
- Phase 2. During 2014-15 each University/HEI will appoint external examiners for all second cycle programmes, and make appointments for two further first cycle programmes per faculty. These will take part in the assessment process for awards in Summer 2015. The Mentor will continue to work with the University to develop training and support for external examiners.
- Phase 3. During 2015-16, external examiners will be appointed for all remaining first and second cycle programmes in each University HEI and complete the introduction of the external examiner system across the Region. Mentoring will no longer be an external process, but a mentoring scheme will be developed within each University/HEI in which those with experience of external examining at Phase 1 will mentor new external examiners for Phase 3.
- Each University/HEI will make appointments on the advice of the Dean of Faculty, with confirmation by the Quality Assurance Office of the University. Appointees should hold no more than two other external examiner posts at any level (except Doctoral examination).

The introduction of the External Examiner system will be monitored by the Board of the Regional Platform, and discussions will take place with National Quality Agencies to consider ways in which external examiner processes and reports may be integrated into the self-assessment system and external quality review of universities.

The Regional Platform will also consider application for funding from the European Commission and other agencies for support for the introduction of this very important aspect of quality assurance for Universities.