

# JOINT STATEMENT

## EXTENDED VERSION

1<sup>ST</sup> JOINT SCIENCE CONFERENCE

INTERGOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVE WESTERN BALKANS



Intergovernmental Initiative Western Balkans

Joint Science Conference

1. Following the Intergovernmental Conference on the Western Balkans (WB), which took place in Berlin on 28 August 2014, the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in agreement with the German Federal Government took over the initiative in the priority area of academic and social affairs by organising the 1<sup>st</sup> Joint Science Conference from 15 to 17 July 2015 in Halle and Berlin, Germany.

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*Preamble*

2. This conference was attended by representatives of national academies, of rectors' conferences and distinguished scientists invited *ad personam* by the Leopoldina and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The participating parties came from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo\*, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia as well as Austria, Germany and Italy. Embassies to Germany, representatives of the German Federal Government and the EU-Commission participated as observers.

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*Stakeholders*

3. We – the conference participants – have identified key issues, which need urgent attention and reforms. In the WB, there is a chronic shortage of public and private funding for science and research (current expenditure is significantly below the EU goal of 3% of national GDP). Planning reliability is hampered by short term focus and distributive approaches towards financing. Young scientists have difficulties to establish themselves in the system. Mass emigration (especially brain drain) is one of the greatest risks for future development of the WB. Existing resources, infrastructures, projects and people in the science systems are insufficiently linked. Knowledge is not systematically shared and diffused. This leads to a high degree of isolation / inward orientation of the national science systems. Science and its results are rarely included in decision-making and opinion-building. The knowledge gained by researchers is thus lost for the beneficial use of politics and society.

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*State of Affairs:  
Challenges for a  
European Future  
of the WB Science  
Systems*

4. Therefore we suggest the following solutions for change:

5. Adequate funding is needed to support education, research and innovation in the WB. We strongly advocate the goal of allocating 3% of national GDP for higher education and science. Planning reliability and sustainable financing are conditions for strategic development of the science systems: not only short term planning, but middle and long term approaches, not distributive, but competitive. To ensure a reliable evaluation of performance, unified quality standards – within the WB and following the EU-standards – must be established.

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*Sustainable  
Funding and  
Unified Quality  
Standards*

6. Young scientists are a key element of science. They need a reliable perspective in their home countries, starting immediately after graduation, making it attractive for them to stay and to get involved in the science systems, thus contributing to the progress of their country and the WB region as a whole. Scientific research should be acknowledged for its essential value for society. Scientists working abroad (the WB academic diaspora) should be encouraged to return through cross border projects and brain gain initiatives, thereby creating a welcome culture for returning scientists. Data repositories of the academic diaspora should be developed (following for instance the CORDIS example).

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*Young Scientists  
and Brain Drain /  
Brain Gain*

7. Excellent individual scientists can function as agents of change. The support of their re-search by targeted funding is of highest priority. We strongly recommend the timely creation of a South-Eastern European Research Council (SEERC) (in a joint consortium with the European Research Council and the research funding institutions from the WB countries) or a South-Eastern European Research Foundation (SEERF), both emphasising merit-based individual funding. Therefor transparent selection criteria guided only by academic excellence and evaluation procedures according to international standards, with the participation of international evaluators, are needed.

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*SEERC / SEERF  
and Excellent  
Individuals as  
Agents of Change*

8. The huge scientific potential of the WB countries should be – particularly in times of budgetary restrictions and political instability – pooled in networks of Regional Centres of Excellence (up to five). Such interdisciplinary centres should be supranational and have three major tasks: <sup>(i)</sup> state of the art basic and applied research, <sup>(ii)</sup> internationally competitive doctoral and postdoctoral training, and <sup>(iii)</sup> transfer of research results. This will enhance the chances for accessing EU-funding. Possible thematic areas could be environment and energy, cultural heritage, demographic change, tourism, justice and security, health and quality of life, information and communications technology, and regional and local development.

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*Scientific  
Potential Merged  
in Regional  
Centres of  
Excellence*

\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSC 1244 resolution and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

9. In order to have state of the art facilities in the WB with a manageable financial input, resources and infrastructures (educational, research, core facilities, etc.) should be used jointly. Already existing cooperative formats with a focus on WB (such as the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research) should be strengthened and extended.
10. The WB science systems need to be integrated within the region and connected with the EU. We recommend the cooperation in twinning projects between EU and WB partners, the organisation of joint study programmes on Master and PhD level and an easier access for scientists from the WB to EU-funded research programmes. Mobility schemes, which connect scientists from WB and the EU should be developed: <sup>(i)</sup> by facilitating international travel for scientists and students from the WB region (e.g. by simplifying visa requirements), <sup>(ii)</sup> by creating a regional exchange programme (following the example of Erasmus or integrating into the existing Erasmus-programme), and <sup>(iii)</sup> by starting other initiatives for exchange of young people on a bilateral or multilateral basis (one successful example is the German-French Youth Exchange and the German-French University).
11. Institutionalised mechanisms for the science-politics-society dialogue in WB need to be implemented. The participating parties are willing to share knowledge and technical support for capacity building. A scientific advisory mechanism analogue to the one used at the G7 summits should be realised for the Intergovernmental Initiative Western Balkans.
12. Annual Joint Science Conferences – as one of the pillars of the so-called “Western Balkans Process” – should serve as platform / umbrella for cooperation in the science system and in the wider societal dimension. The Conferences should identify challenges in the science system and develop sustainable solutions as well as formulate policy recommendations. The progress made should be assessed and evaluated during an annual meeting with changing thematic focuses. The coordination should be assured by a secretariat.
13. A common European future must be shaped now and the Western Balkans are an inseparable part of it – maintaining the status quo is not a viable option. We therefore resolutely support efforts for cooperation, reconciliation and integration in the WB. A particular focus should be on young people as the driving force for positive change. Sciences and humanities should be considered as a continuous investment into the future. To address the identified challenges and implement sustainable solutions, we recommend the following to the WB Summit in Vienna on 27 August 2015:
1. Commit to allocate 3% of national GDP for higher education, science and research and establish unified quality standards for evaluation;
  2. Support firmly institutional change, which <sup>(i)</sup> modernises the WB science systems in convergence with EU-standards, towards integration into the European Research Area, and <sup>(ii)</sup> which creates opportunities for young researchers and graduates, thereby reducing brain drain and encouraging brain gain;
  3. Create a South Eastern European Research Council or Research Foundation, which funds individual outstanding scientists as agents of change, using a competitive selection mechanism based exclusively on research quality and academic excellence;
  4. Establish interconnected Centres of Excellence in the WB as cooperation platforms by: <sup>(i)</sup> pooling resources and competencies, <sup>(ii)</sup> investing jointly in state of the art core facilities and research infrastructures, <sup>(iii)</sup> supporting the mobility of researchers and students, <sup>(iv)</sup> establishing competitive doctoral and post-doctoral training and <sup>(v)</sup> creating innovation communities;
  5. Institutionalise the dialogue between science, politics and society, by <sup>(i)</sup> creating mechanisms of consultation and strategic planning, and by <sup>(ii)</sup> establishing procedures for providing unbiased science-based advice to politics and society.

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*Pooling of Efforts  
and Use of  
Existing Networks*

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*Cooperation,  
Connectivity,  
Mobility*

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*Science-  
Politics-Society:  
Institutionalised  
Dialogue*

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*Future of the  
Joint Science  
Conference as a  
Pillar of the  
“WB Process”*

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*Policy  
Recommendations*