

7TH RECTORS' FORUM OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE AND WESTERN BALKANS DECLARATION

INTRODUCTION

DATE/VENUE

4-5/9/2023

UNIVERSITY

OF RIJEKA

—RECTORATE

Trg braće Mažuranića 10,
Rijeka

The Rectors' Forum comprises universities from the region and is dedicated to enhancing cooperation among universities and becoming the voice of academic institutions in this part of Europe. There is still a long road in front of us, minding the challenges such as lack of the critical mass of expertise for demanding projects, a tendency towards inbreeding, or the lack of a substantial contribution to regional development.

Declaration of the Rectors' Forum of Southeast Europe and Western Balkans

RIJEKA,
5/9/23

We, the representatives of universities gathered at the 7th Rectors' Forum of Southeast Europe and Western Balkans, unanimously declare our joint determination to increase and strengthen regional and international connections and joint undertakings, raise the quality standards of research and higher education, and enhance academic circular mobility within our institutional network. To that end, we call on the relevant international stakeholders to support the development of meaningful initiatives that could allow academics and highly skilled professionals to have greater impact on public policy and, consequently, advance all the countries, economies and societies in the region. An excellence-oriented and resilient science and education system is necessary to face the challenges Southeast Europe has to cope with.

The Rectors' Forum has emerged from earlier initiatives to develop intra-regional university cooperation, with the aim of finding answers to common challenges and making use of existing potentials, while developing policies that foster integration into EHEA and ERA. We are fully cognisant of the value of the 'Novi Sad Initiative' and the biannual 'International Forum on Higher Education Reform' under the umbrella of the 'Regional Cooperation Council and of the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research'. We value and commit to participate in the Berlin Process that facilitates cooperation and integration into the European Union, assembling relevant national stakeholders in education and science within the 'Berlin Process Joint Science Conference'.

We acknowledge the significant steps taken recently towards the inclusion of Western Balkans and Southeast European universities into EHEA and ERA, especially through 'Horizon Europe' and 'Erasmus+', and emphasise the potential of the 'European Universities Initiative', which enables Western Balkan universities' full membership and, consequently, their engagement in Europe's transformative agenda. A comprehensive, long-term plan for research collaboration with the Western Balkans is also outlined in the European Commission's 'Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth, and Sports'.

Nevertheless, we feel compelled to also point out that the challenges identified over a decade ago have proven to be obdurate or even worsen. The innovation gap between the EU13 and EU14 is yet again evident in the latest 'European Innovation Scoreboard' from 2023, and it is considerably wider compared to Western Balkans countries. Our region performs lower on most indicators, such as human resources, digitalisation, intellectual assets, firm investment and linkages, employment impacts, etc. Such circumstances significantly affect Europe's global competitiveness. Higher education and research funding, particularly in the Western Balkans, have constantly remained low, despite declared commitments to reach EU levels. Collaboration among universities from the region is less developed than with other European partners. Consequently, universities in the region are unable to attain robust and broad expertise to head complex and demanding projects, which in turn weakens their contribution to the societies to which they belong. Most talented young graduates have limited potential for career development and, therefore, seek opportunities beyond the region. The region remains a source of emigration of talents, and this is turning into a structural weakness.

We strongly believe that there can be no social and economic development, nor indeed sustainable peace, without making education and research a collaborative endeavour of the highest priority in Southeast Europe. We call upon all relevant

international stakeholders, especially those participating in the Berlin Process from the Western Balkans countries, to prioritise 'multi-country' initiatives, including a wide range of additional financing that would enable students, academics, and researchers from the region to provide significant contributions to Europe's global ambitions. We call for targeted support for research and innovation excellence centres and technology development in the region itself; staff capacity-building for science management; implementation of a European Student Card, and region-tailored mobility of students, researchers and staff within our institutional network and between different economic sectors of participating countries – all leading to a higher, evidence- and expertise-based contribution to public policy, thus, progressively closing the innovation and development gap.

We, the representatives of universities from the entire region, declare our dedication to continue operating the Forum as a platform that develops concepts, coordinates measures and jointly advocates for European and regional collaboration, and European integration. Representing a unique, regionally owned regional platform, we call upon all relevant international stakeholders to include the Rectors' Forum as a partner for the implementation of higher education and research policies and initiatives in Southeast Europe and Western Balkans.

General Assembly of the Rectors' Forum
of Southeast Europe and Western Balkans

September 2023, Rijeka