



**POLICY
ANSWERS**

PATHS TOWARDS STRENGTHENING AND TRANSFORMING ACADEMIA-INDUSTRY COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS.

LESSONS FROM AUSTRIA AND SERBIA

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1. Introduction

The collaboration between academia and industry is a key driver of innovation, fostering competitiveness, technological advancement, and sustainable growth. By fostering these partnerships, each sector's strengths are leveraged: academic and research organisations provide knowledge, expertise and technological advancements, while businesses contribute market-oriented insights and agility. Despite academia-industry collaboration potential, it still does not always emerge naturally due to differences in objectives, time horizons, and incentive structures in different economies.

While academia focuses on fundamental research and long-term knowledge creation, industry is driven by market needs and short-term returns. As a result, without targeted incentives—such as funding schemes, tax benefits, or regulatory support—businesses may see collaboration as too risky or resource-intensive, while researchers may lack motivation to engage with industry. Public sector interventions are therefore essential to bridge this gap, fostering effective partnerships that lead to technological advancements and competitive advantages.

Effective cooperation examples, in particular, to make it easier for SMEs to collaborate with research-performing organisations have been established all over the world.

In this report, some selected good practices are highlighted from Austria and Serbia, based on a study visit and desktop research. In particular, some examples implemented by Austrian Cooperative Research (ACR)¹ and the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG)², show how structured collaboration can incentivise entities to work together in Austria. These organisations offer frameworks enabling SMEs to access advanced research, facilitate knowledge transfer, and address challenges in areas like digitalisation, green transformation, and climate neutrality.

Also in Serbia, the ecosystem of policies, programmes and institutions is increasingly addressing the aim to support the academia-industry relationships within the Science Fund and Innovation Fund.

In the frame of the POLICY ANSWERS project³, which provides opportunities for policy dialogue and learning, analysis and capacity building for stakeholders in the Western Balkans region, such good practices offer possibilities to learn, emulate and scale up.

Thus, this document examines good practice examples of collaboration between academia and industry, financing approaches, and support mechanisms offered by the Austrian FFG and ACR as well as the Serbian Innovation and Science Funds, highlighting their role in fostering academia-industry collaboration. It also identifies key barriers, such as complex funding processes and limited interdisciplinary collaboration, and proposes actionable solutions. Furthermore, the analysis considers how these good practice examples can be adapted to the unique context of the Western Balkans, emphasising the need for streamlined funding, interdisciplinary research hubs, and robust standardisation practices.

By exploring synergies between academia and industry, this report seeks to outline a roadmap for fostering innovation ecosystems that drive sustainable economic development regionally and globally.

¹ For more information about the Austrian Cooperative Research (ACR), please visit: <https://www.acr.ac.at/>

² For more information about the Austrian Research Promotion Agency, please visit: <https://www.ffg.at/en>

³ For more information about the POLICY ANSWERS Horizon Europe project (full title: "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS"), Grant Agreement 101058873, please visit www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu.

This document presents several examples of support provided by ACR and FFG that support academia-industry collaboration.

ACR good practice examples for academia-industry collaboration that are presented in this document are: ACR interdisciplinary collaboration, ACR awards and ACR events, trainings and capacity-building activities.

FFG good practice examples for academia-industry collaboration that are presented in this document are: the COMET programme (Competence Centres for Excellent Technologies), Thematic programmes, Industrial PhD, and FFG Innovation Vouchers (in collaboration with ACR).

The Science Fund of Serbia offers a range of programmes⁴ designed to address societal challenges and promote technological development, innovation, and collaboration between science and industry such as the Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme⁵. Programmes can also include support for artificial intelligence, young researchers, diaspora collaboration, and green transformation.

The Innovation Fund of Serbia offers several programmes to support innovation and research, including initiatives for science-business collaboration. Serbian Science Fund programmes are designed to foster the growth of enterprises and support the commercialisation of innovative products and solutions. They aim to enhance the technological capacity of SMEs and encourage the application of research findings in the business sector. Examples of SF programmes are: Science-Business Collaboration Programme, Technology Transfer Programme and Innovation Vouchers.⁶

Both the Austrian FFG and the ACR Network are examples of activities supporting research and innovation in Austria. Their funding models foster academia-industry collaboration, similar to initiatives in Serbia, such as the Innovation Fund and the Science Fund. These Serbian funds support innovation and research by promoting collaboration between universities, research institutions, and industry. Both Serbian funds and Austrian programmes aim to foster technological advancements and enhance competitiveness through strategic funding and support for SMEs and academic partnerships. Examples of good practices from this document can serve as a model for strengthening academia-industry collaboration in Western Balkans.

⁴ All about Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia and their programmes can be found at these links: <https://fondzanauku.gov.rs/> and <https://fondzanauku.gov.rs/programi-test/>

⁵ For more information about the Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme, please visit:

⁶ All about Serbian Innovation Fund and their programmes can be found at these links: <https://www.inovacionifond.rs/lat/> and <https://www.inovacionifond.rs/lat/>

2. Good Practice Examples from Austria

2.1 ACR network examples of operation

The ACR network, founded in 1954, recently celebrated its 70th anniversary. Initially established with 12 founding members, seven of them remain active within the ACR research network today. The ACR Secretariat gathers a network of 19 non-profit research institutes, each a leader in its respective field (e.g., wood research, food research, construction) in 2025. ACR operates as a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to bridging SMEs with research.

Private funding has always been a key membership criterion, while public funding from the Ministry of Economic Affairs was introduced 30 years ago, demonstrating the government's commitment to supporting SME innovation. The ACR presents itself as a facilitator of impactful partnerships between industry and academia.

The organisation receives funding from the Republic of Austria's Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy⁷, allocating approximately EUR 5 million annually. Also, ACR is being co-financed by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (WKO)⁸, and from institute membership fees. EUR 500,000 are dedicated to the ACR Secretariat administrative costs, and the rest of the funding is distributed for ACR member's capacity building, and for establishing interdisciplinary collaboration between academia and industry.

2.1.1 ACR interdisciplinary collaboration

ACR institutes engage in hundreds of collaborative projects annually, leveraging their expertise to support SMEs across Austria. Additionally, institutes can apply for three-year subsidies via ACR that focus on direct collaboration with SMEs to develop innovative products, from idea to market.

Approx. EUR 2 million for research and interdisciplinary collaborations among research institutes gathered with one specific topic/project with SMEs. The application process is dedicated to interdisciplinary collaboration with at least two institutes applying jointly for ACR funding by submitting project proposals that demonstrate direct collaboration with SMEs and a clear path to innovation. The funding decisions consider the project's potential for knowledge transfer, practical application, and economic impact.

2.1.2 ACR awards⁹

The Austrian Cooperative Research (ACR) organisation promotes the development of innovative solutions by awarding outstanding achievements in research and development. ACR Awards serve as a catalyst for innovation, these awards aim to enhance the competitiveness of SMEs and foster collaboration between science and industry. ACR awards is a good example of acknowledging the good collaboration between academia and industry.

2.1.3 ACR events, training and capacity-building activities

The ACR Secretariat provides structured training programmes and coordinates interdisciplinary collaborations to address industry challenges. With approximately EUR 2 million allocated to supporting institutes, ACR facilitates knowledge transfer between research institutes and

⁷ For more information about Austria's Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, please read here: <https://www.bmaw.gv.at/en.html>

⁸ For more information about the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, please read here: <https://www.wko.at/austrian-economic-chambers>

⁹ For more information about ACR awards, please read here: <https://www.acr.ac.at/acr-awards/>

enhances technical expertise among its members. The Secretariat organises tailored training opportunities for ACR member institutes and SMEs, helping them comply with relevant standards and develop innovative solutions. Additionally, ACR institutes act as research departments for SMEs, fostering collaboration and driving industry innovation.

The ACR Secretariat also organises events aimed at lobbying and networking, providing a platform for member institutes and SMEs to connect with key industry stakeholders. Through its annual Forum, ACR fosters dialogue on pressing industry topics, while study visits to similar institutions across Europe facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration on a broader scale.

2.2 FFG examples of operation

The Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) was established in 2004 through the merger of several predecessor organisations. Its primary roles include:

- Managing national funding programmes for research, innovation, and technological development.
- Supporting Austria's active participation in international initiatives, such as Horizon Europe.
- Facilitating collaboration between academia, industry, and SMEs to enhance Austria's competitiveness in science and technology.

FFG's activities are funded by the Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation, and Technology (BMK) and the Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria for Labour and Economy. This highlights the government's commitment to fostering innovation while addressing environmental and societal challenges through technological advancements.

FFG has developed robust financial models to promote cooperation between academia and industry. These initiatives provide funding for research projects, technological innovations, and advancements that contribute to economic and social progress.

As the cornerstone of Austria's innovation ecosystem, FFG continues to drive progress across industries, acting as a bridge between national and international research efforts. Its examples of fostering collaboration and supporting applied research have established Austria as a leader in science and technology. FFG also implements thematic programmes, different structural programmes, tax credits, etc.

2.2.1 COMET programme¹⁰

The COMET programme is a flexible framework that links science and industry to enable technological innovation, strengthen Austria's research capacities, and promote the country as a globally competitive research and business hub. By fostering technology transfer, the programme supports the development of new products, processes, and services, ultimately benefiting both the economy and society. FFG's COMET programme operates through three structures: centres, modules, and projects.

- **Centres:** As of now, approximately 25 centres are funded, serving as established research hubs led by academic institutions. Centres serve as hubs for innovation, connecting academic and industry stakeholders.
- **Modules:** Connect academic research institutes with industry partners (medium and large companies), with several different modules actively promoting collaboration. Modules focus on fostering collaborations and applying research findings.

¹⁰ For more information about the FFG COMET programme, please visit: <https://www.ffg.at/en/comet/programme>

- **Projects:** Enable direct collaboration with SMEs; hundreds of projects have been funded to date, providing smaller-scale but impactful support. FFG provides administrative support to help SMEs navigate funding applications.

The programme currently supports 24 COMET centres, 12 modules, and 14 projects across Austria, including cities such as Vienna, Graz, Linz, and Salzburg.

The COMET programme also supports a gradual integration of SMEs into research networks, starting with smaller projects and progressing toward module or centre participation.

COMET centres receive 50% public funding, split equally among two Ministries (Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria - Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology¹¹ and Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria - Labour and Economy) and regional governments. The remaining 50% is funded by participating companies, with half thereof provided as cash contributions.

Annual funding for a typical centre is EUR 5 million, with a total COMET budget of approximately EUR 75 million per year.

The application process for centres and modules:

- Centres and modules are established through competitive applications requiring detailed research programmes and partnerships with academia and industry.
- Applicants must secure 50% co-funding from companies, with a portion provided as cash contributions.
- Mid-term evaluations ensure alignment with COMET's goals and maintain funding for high-performing centres.

Application Process for SME Projects:

- SMEs apply for project funding by partnering with research institutes and submitting proposals that demonstrate clear innovative goals and benefits for the industry.
- Project applications are simpler but receive less funding compared to centres

2.2.2 Thematic programmes¹²

FFG also supports thematic programmes that target specific technologies or societal challenges (e.g., green transformation, climate neutrality, and digitalisation).

FFG's thematic programmes play a crucial role in fostering academia-industry cooperation by providing targeted funding and support for collaborative projects that address key societal and technological challenges. These programmes encourage partnerships between research institutions and businesses, facilitating knowledge transfer, innovation, and the commercialization of research results. By focusing on areas such as green transformation, climate neutrality, and digitalization, they enable academia to contribute scientific expertise while industry provides practical applications, ensuring that research outcomes lead to tangible economic and societal benefits.

FFG operates various programmes across the following fields:

- **Energy, Cities, and Environment:** Programmes such as Smart Cities Demo and City of the Future promote sustainable urban development and energy efficiency.
- **Information and Communication Technologies (ICT):** Programmes like ICT of the Future and AT: net drive digitalisation and IT sector growth.
- **Circular Economy and Manufacturing:** Initiatives such as Manufacturing of the Future and Circular Economy support sustainable production and recycling.

¹¹ For more information about Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria - Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, please visit: <https://www.bmk.gv.at/en.html>

¹² For more information about the FFG Thematic programmes, please visit: <https://www.ffg.at/en/node/5603>

- **Mobility:** The Zero Emission Mobility programme focuses on sustainable transport and infrastructure for electric vehicles.
- **Security:** Programmes like KIRAS and FORTE prioritise research in security and defence technologies.
- **Transnational Initiatives and Calls:** These include collaborations through Horizon Europe, Horizon 2020, and bilateral projects with global partners, such as China.
- These programmes focus on applied research and include top-down funding approaches for pre-defined topics.

Thematic programmes address specific national or regional priorities and offer targeted support for areas like energy efficiency, biodiversity, and circular economy.

2.2.3 Industrial PhDs¹³

An Industrial PhD Project involves a doctoral candidate employed by a company or a non-university research institution, conducting research under scientific supervision at a university. This programme is designed to bridge academic research with practical, industry-focused applications. The Industrial PhD Project Funding Programme provides financial support for research initiatives conducted in collaboration between academia and industry. The funded projects have a duration ranging from a minimum of 2 years to a maximum of 3 years, providing flexibility based on the scope of the research.

The programme covers up to 50% of eligible costs, with a maximum funding amount of EUR 110,000 per project. This funding aims to support the integration of doctoral candidates into industry-focused research projects that deliver practical applications.

Eligible applicants include companies with research and development (R&D) activities and non-university research institutions. To qualify, the organisation must have a registered office in Austria, ensuring that the funding contributes to the growth of Austria's innovation ecosystem.

General requirements for Industrial PhD:

- **Employment:** The company or non-university research institution must employ the doctoral candidate for at least 50% of a full-time equivalent (FTE) position and ensure that this proportion of time is dedicated to the PhD project.
- **Mentorship:** A mentor within the funded organisation (company or research institution) must guide the candidate throughout the project.
- **University Enrolment:** The doctoral candidate must be enrolled and supervised at a university for the entire duration of the project.
- **Industrial Application:** The project must have a clear reference to a concrete industrial application, demonstrating its relevance and potential impact in the industrial sector.

Characteristics of the Calls:

- Proposals can be submitted continuously.
- At least 50% of the available funds are reserved for female doctoral candidates, promoting gender equality in research and innovation.

In the Republic of Serbia there is a similar state programme¹⁴. The programme fosters collaboration between academia and industry, aiming to strengthen Serbia's research capacity and support emerging researchers' careers. In this way the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation in Serbia supports young researchers to get employed at research institutions. Every year, they announce a call to fund scientific projects promoting innovation.

¹³ For more information about the FFG Industrial PhD programme please visit: https://www.ffg.at/en/industrial_phd

¹⁴ Last call for talented young researchers PhD students, call is announced each year: <https://nitra.gov.rs/en/ministarstvo/vesti/objavljen-osmi-poziv-talentovanim-mladim-istravacima-studentima-doktorskih-akademskih-studija>

Eligible organisations include accredited research institutions and universities, while eligible researchers are PhD students employed in these institutions. The funding also requires organisations to ensure timely employment contracts for the researchers.

2.2.4 Innovation Vouchers¹⁵

The Innovation Voucher programme in Austria, managed by the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG), supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by providing funding for collaborative research and development projects with research institutions.

SMEs can receive grants ranging from EUR 10,000 to EUR 12,500, covering up to 80% of eligible project costs. For example, to qualify for a EUR 10,000 grant, total project costs must be at least EUR 12,500.

The funding can be used for various activities such as feasibility studies, prototype development, and initial research for innovative projects. It is aimed at fostering collaboration between SMEs and research institutions including universities and non-university research facilities.

The application process is designed to be straightforward; however, many smaller SMEs find it challenging due to perceived administrative burdens. Thus, it is a practice observed, that for example, ACR institutes assist some companies in navigating the application process and ensuring that funds are used appropriately for legitimate R&D rather than for example routine testing.

The programme encourages projects in various sectors with an emphasis on future-oriented themes such as digitalisation, climate change, and energy transition.

This programme has been ongoing since 2018 and continues to enhance the competitiveness of SMEs in Austria by promoting innovation through collaboration with research entities.

Similar programmes exist in Serbia (see below), Montenegro and North Macedonia. The Western Balkans Innovation Vouchers¹⁶ within the Horizon Europe project POLICY ANSWERS exemplify how such a scheme can be translated to the Western Balkans and financial incentives can bridge the gap between small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and public research institutions on a regional level, promoting innovation and knowledge transfer across the Western Balkans. This initiative provides a significant opportunity for SMEs to collaborate with research institutions, developing new products, services, and technologies while contributing to the region's green and digital transitions, which should be made sustainable and not just a one-off measure.

¹⁵ More about FFG Innovation vouchers are here: <https://www.ffg.at/programme/InnovationsscheckmitSelbstbehalt>

¹⁶ For more information about WB Innovation Vouchers please visit: <https://westernbalkans-infohub.eu/calls/western-balkans-innovation-voucher-scheme/>

3. Good Practice Examples from the Republic of Serbia

3.1 The Innovation Fund of the Republic of Serbia examples of operation

The Innovation Fund of Serbia, active since 2011, was established to drive technological and research capacities through public-private sector collaboration. It aims to enhance the innovation ecosystem, especially by supporting start-ups and fostering links between science and industry.

The Fund's vision is to contribute to Serbia's economic development by strengthening innovation and helping enterprises with innovative potential. The Fund also offers financial, technical, and advisory support, with European Union backing playing a pivotal role in its operations. It has created an independent governance structure, aided by an Expert Commission of international professionals.

The programmes that directly connect science and industry are:

- Science-Business Collaboration Programme - Facilitates partnerships between research institutions and businesses to develop practical solutions.
- Technology Transfer Programme - Helps in commercialising research findings by linking researchers with industry partners.
- Innovation Vouchers - Encourages businesses to engage with scientific expertise for innovation development.

3.1.1 Science and Industry Collaboration Programme¹⁷

This programme is designed to encourage private sector companies and public scientific research organisations to jointly implement research and development projects aimed at creating new products and services with market potential. This programme promotes partnerships that bridge the gap between scientific research and industrial application, enhancing innovation and contributing to economic growth.

Applicants submit proposals detailing project goals, potential market applications, and expected outcomes. The financing model involves a combination of grants and co-financing, depending on the project's scope and needs. Applicants are required to provide detailed financial documentation and a project implementation plan.

3.1.2 Technology Transfer Programme¹⁸

The Technology Transfer Programme supports research organisations in Serbia by helping them commercialise inventions that have at least reached Level 4 of Technological Readiness and have regulated intellectual property ownership.

It offers financial support (up to RSD 6 million) for research commercialisation and mentorship in areas such as product definition, market analysis, business model development, and intellectual property strategy.

The programme is funded by the Republic of Serbia's budget, with funds allocated for 2021 and 2022. It was implemented as part of the project "Support to Research, Innovation, and Technology Transfer" funded by the EU Pre-accession Funds (IPA 2013). Applicants eligible for this programme included research organisations aiming to commercialise research outcomes.

¹⁷ For more information about the Science and Industry Collaboration Programme, please visit: <https://www.inovacionifond.rs/cir/program/program-saradnje-nauke-i-privrede>

¹⁸ For more information about the Technology Transfer Programme, please visit: <https://www.inovacionifond.rs/cir/program/program-transfera-tehnologije>

Programme Conditions:

- Eligible entities: Research organisations with findings reaching at least TRL4.
- Financial support: Up to RSD 6 million.
- Mentorship: Support for commercialisation, licensing, and business model development.

3.1.3 Innovation Vouchers Programme¹⁹

Innovation Voucher programme provides financial support to micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Serbia, helping them improve the innovation level of their products by using research and development services.

The programme covers up to 60% of costs for services, with a maximum amount of RSD 800,000 per voucher. SMEs must co-finance at least 40% of the costs.

The programme is aimed for research organisations and services aimed at developing new products, processes, or services.

A similar programme is also available in Austria (Innovation vouchers are in subchapter 1.2.4).

3.2 Serbian Science Fund examples of operation

The Science Fund of Serbia offers 13 programmes aimed at supporting various areas of scientific development. However, from all of these programmes there is only one programme that supports explicitly the collaboration between science and industry: Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme

3.2.1 Green Science and Industry Cooperation Programme²⁰

The Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme, launched in 2022, supports applied research focused on environmental protection and sustainable practices. It aims to foster partnerships between research institutions and businesses to develop solutions addressing pollution, climate change, and sustainable resource management. Projects are funded up to EUR 200,000 for the first phase (24 months) with an optional 12-month commercialisation phase. The application requires project title, team details, budget, timeline, and impact assessments. The programme encourages eco-friendly innovation and industrial practices.

¹⁹ For more information about the Innovation Vouchers Programme, please visit: <https://www.inovacionifond.rs/cir/program/inovacioni-vauceri>

²⁰ For more information about the Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme, please visit: <https://fondzanauku.gov.rs/zeleni-program-saradnje-nauke-i-privrede/>

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENTATIONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION FOR A BETTER COLLABORATION BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND INDUSTRY

From these highlighted Austrian and Serbian good practice examples of cooperation between academia and industry several "gaps" in the Serbian examples of academia-industry collaboration can be identified, as well as areas that could be improved for better synergy between science and industry.

- **Limited number of specific collaboration programmes:** In Serbia, only a few programmes directly support academia-industry collaboration, such as the "Science-Business Collaboration Programme" and the "Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme." In contrast to Austria, where various programmes cover a broader range of industrial sectors, Serbia has a smaller number of specialised initiatives that support practical collaboration between science and industry.
- **Lack of systematic and long-term structures:** Austria has structured, long-term initiatives, such as COMET centres, which provide platforms for continuous collaboration between academia and industry. In Serbia, many programmes like the "Innovation Co-Financing Programme" or the "Technology Transfer Programme" have short-term goals and are not always connected to long-term structures, which may hinder the development of stable partnerships.
- **Limited support for large and medium-sized companies:** In Serbia, the focus is on supporting start-ups and small enterprises (e.g., through the "Innovation Vouchers" and "Innovation Co-Financing Programme"), whereas in Austria, the support is broader and covers various sizes of companies, including large industrial players. This can create a gap in Serbia, as large companies often have more complex needs that may not always be adequately covered by the existing programmes.
- **Insufficient financial support for innovation:** Although there are several Serbian funding programmes (like the "Technology Transfer Programme" and "Innovation Co-Financing Programme"), the maximum financial support in Serbia (e.g., up to EUR 500,000 for innovations) are lower compared to Austrian initiatives, such as FFG programmes, or the COMET centers.
- **Austria has intensive capacity-building mechanism of strengthening scientific institutions,** while in Serbia, such programmes are not dedicated to the specific institution like it is ACR in Austria. Serbia could strengthen support for technical and professional training that would facilitate better integration of researchers and entrepreneurs.
- **Lack of integration into international networks:** Austria has strong integration with international networks through programmes like Horizon Europe and complementary initiatives, which provide broader access to resources and partners. In Serbia, while some international funds and initiatives exist, integration into broader international research and industrial networks is not as developed, limiting access to global innovations and partnerships.

Serbia (and presumably other Western Balkan economies) would benefit from establishing a comprehensive network similar to the Austrian Cooperative Research (ACR) to strengthen collaboration between academia and industry. This network could provide a more organised framework for sustainable cooperation, enhance capacity building, and foster long-term partnerships between academia and industrial sectors.

A more robust financial structure and improved funding models for academia-industry collaborations in Serbia are essential. This should include increasing funding for joint projects,

enhancing financial support for medium and large companies, and creating flexible, long-term programmes that promote innovation and the commercialisation of research outcomes.

Strengthening collaboration between science and industry in Serbia and the broader Western Balkans region requires coordinated efforts, investment in innovation infrastructure, and the creation of flexible financial structures. Programmes that foster long-term partnerships are key to unlocking the region's potential.

The Western Balkans Innovation Vouchers programme presents a significant opportunity for advancing the region's innovation agenda. By encouraging partnerships between SMEs and public research institutions, the programme strengthens regional cooperation and enhances the capacity for technological development, ultimately contributing to long-term economic growth and global competitiveness.

Compared to Serbia's "Innovation Vouchers" which primarily support start-ups and small enterprises, the Western Balkans Innovation Vouchers take a broader approach by enabling SMEs to collaborate with public research institutions across multiple countries in the region. While the focus remains on small businesses, the programme's regional scope promotes cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange, which are crucial for scaling innovation and fostering economic growth.

By developing dedicated networks and funding models, the region can accelerate its innovation potential, improve economic development, and boost global competitiveness.

This document provides a comprehensive analysis of academia-industry collaboration, specifically comparing Serbia's initiatives with Austria's well-established frameworks. It identifies both strengths and gaps, particularly in funding, programme structure, and international integration. Concrete examples, such as the COMET programme, ACR examples, and Serbia's Green Science-Business Collaboration Programme, serve as practical guides for enhancing innovation ecosystems in the Western Balkans through

- **Strategic Depth:** A clear understanding of how academia-industry partnerships drive technological and economic progress.
- **Policy Focus:** Actionable recommendations tailored to the Western Balkans region, emphasizing the need for sustainable frameworks and international integration.
- **Practical Insights:** Detailed descriptions of operational good practice examples, financing structures, and application processes for various programmes.

Overall, this document hopefully offers actionable pathways to enhance collaboration and innovation capacity.



ABOUT POLICY ANSWERS

POLICY ANSWERS (R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS) supports policy coordination in the Western Balkans and with the EC and the EU. 14 partner organisations, representing network nodes in the region and EU expert organisations, support policy dialogue through formal meetings (such as ministerial and steering platform and ad-hoc policy meetings), monitoring and agenda setting, capacity building and implementation of the EU's Western Balkan Agenda, as well as the alignment of thematic priorities. The project implements regional pilot activities and offers an information hub based on the westernbalkans-infohub.eu online information platform. The partners provide analytical evidence via monitoring and mapping activities of the stakeholder ecosystem, of the implementation of the Western Balkans Agenda and of the Western Balkans' integration into the European Research Area as well as via strategic foresight. POLICY ANSWERS also allows for tailored and targeted capacity building activities in the Western Balkans as well as regional alignment of priorities in relation to the digital transformation, the green agenda and towards healthy societies. Pilot activities provide learning opportunities on policy and programme level and reach out to final beneficiaries related to improved academia-industry cooperation, researcher mobility, inclusion of youth in policy processes, promotion of research infrastructures and increased innovation skills in all areas.

