



**POLICY  
ANSWERS**

## **Circulating Excellence: Rethinking Research Mobility in the Western Balkans**

Main authors: Destine Prayogi Mertadiwangsa  
and Pradeep Ghosh

Responsible organisation: GSI

Date: 7 April 2026



<https://www.facebook.com/WBInfoHub>



<https://x.com/wbinfohub>



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/wbinfohub/>

[www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu](http://www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu)

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I POLICY making, implementation ANd Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS", Grant Agreement N° 101058873.



**Funded by  
the European Union**

## Revision History

Version	Date	Author	Contributors	Description
v0.1	15.01.2026	Destine Prayogi Mertadiwangsa, Pradeep Ghosh (GSI)		First version of report
v0.2	06.02.2026		Elke Dall (ZSI)	Formatting of report and comments
v.03	09.03.2026		Pradeep Ghosh (GSI)	Title added and Accepted comments for final version release
v0.4	01.04.2026		Ulrike Kunze (DLR)	QA check
v0.5	02.04.2026		Pradeep Ghosh (GSI)	Inclusion of QA comments
v1.0	07.04.2026		Elke Dall (ZSI)	Final version for submission

## Disclaimer

POLICY ANSWERS is funded by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe project "R&I policy making, implementation and support in the Western Balkans", Grant Agreement N° 101058873. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union (EU) or the European Commission (EC). Neither the EU nor the EC can be held responsible for them. For further information regarding POLICY ANSWERS visit [www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu](http://www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu)

## Table of contents

List of abbreviations used in this document.....	7
1 Introduction and Methodology.....	8
1.1 Context and background.....	8
1.2 Report objectives.....	9
1.3 Methodology.....	9
2 Regional Analysis and Business Revenue Model.....	10
2.1 Foundation versus Association: comparative analysis.....	10
2.1.1 Key comparative points.....	11
2.1.2 Strategic conclusion.....	12
2.2 The sustainable business revenue model: blended funding.....	12
A blended, sustainable and scalable funding framework.....	12
2.2.1 Public and European funding (anchor funding stream).....	12
2.2.2 Industry and corporate co-funding (demand-driven revenue).....	13
2.2.3 Philanthropy, diaspora and private donations (stability and flexibility).....	13
2.2.4 Institutional memberships and partnership fees (operational sustainability).....	14
2.2.5 Financial governance and risk mitigation.....	14
2.3 Strategic summary.....	14
3 Expert Insights and Strategic Programme Design.....	15
3.1 Experts consultations.....	15
3.1.1 Adna Ašić.....	15
3.1.2 Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić.....	16
3.1.3 Agata Pernuš.....	17
3.1.4 Klaus Rümmele.....	17
3.1.5 Branka Žižić.....	18
3.1.6 Jelena Vesić.....	18
3.1.7 Jing Fang.....	19
3.1.8 Tjaž Črnčec.....	20
3.1.9 Isidora Beraha.....	20
3.1.10 Kai Alexander Fornahl.....	21
3.1.11 Maida Hadžiabdić and Nina Begović.....	21
3.2 Key findings from expert consultations.....	22
3.2.1 Key points from Adna Ašić.....	22
3.2.2 Key points from Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić.....	22
3.2.3 Key points from Agata Pernuš Voigt.....	23
3.2.4 Key points from Klaus Rümmele.....	23
3.2.5 Key points from Branka Žižić.....	23

3.2.6	Key points from Jelena Vesić.....	24
3.2.7	Key points from Jing Fang .....	24
3.2.8	Key points from Tjaz Crncec .....	24
3.2.9	Key points from Isidora Beraha.....	24
3.2.10	Key points from Kai Alexander Fornahl.....	25
3.2.11	Key points from Maida Hadžiabdić and Nina Begović.....	25
3.3	Talent retention and brain circulation .....	25
4	Conclusions and Action Roadmap .....	27
4.1	Summary of key findings.....	27
4.2	Action-oriented recommendations .....	28
5	Recommendation.....	30
5.1	Establishment of a foundation in Germany as the optimal institutional model .....	30
5.1.1	Strategic ecosystem alignment: proximity to world-class research infrastructures..	30
5.1.2	Regulatory and administrative efficiency: favourable legal framework .....	30
5.1.3	Credibility, financial sustainability and international trust.....	30
5.2	Concluding recommendation.....	31
6	References .....	32
7	Appendices .....	34

## List of figures

Figure 1: Expert insights .....	15
Figure 2: Adna Ašić from Verlab Institute .....	15
Figure 3: Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić from Verlab Institute .....	16
Figure 4: Agata Pernuš .....	17
Figure 5: Klaus Rümmele from KIT University.....	17
Figure 6: Branka Žižić from the University of Montenegro .....	18
Figure 7: Jelena Vesić from JSI .....	18
Figure 8: Jing Fang from UNESCO.....	19
Figure 9: Tjaž Črnčec from Student and Youth Organisations .....	20
Figure 10: Isidora Beraha from Institute of Economic Sciences in Belgrade, Serbia.....	20
Figure 11: Kai Alexander Fornahl from UFZ .....	21
Figure 12: Maida Hadžiabdić and Nina Begović of University of Sarajevo.....	21

## List of abbreviations used in this document

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full Term / Description</b>
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AML	Anti-Money Laundering
B&H / BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
COST	European Cooperation in Science and Technology
DKFZ	German Cancer Research Centre (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum)
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIT	European Institute of Innovation and Technology
EMBL	European Molecular Biology Laboratory
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUROCC4SEE	European Competence Centres for High-Performance Computing in South East Europe
FAIR	Facility for Antiproton and Ion Research
GGmbH	Non-profit Limited Liability Company (gemeinnützige GmbH)
GSI	GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research (GSI Helmholtzzentrum für Schwerionenforschung)
HPC	High-Performance Computing
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IFMBE	International Federation for Medical and Biological Engineering
INTL	International Affairs Business Unit
IT	Information Technology
JSI	Jožef Stefan Institute
KIT	Karlsruhe Institute of Technology
MSCA	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
POLICY ANSWERS	R&I Policy Making, Implementation, and Support in the Western Balkans
R&I	Research and Innovation
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UFZ	Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (Umweltforschungszentrum)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WB	Western Balkans
WBMS	Western Balkans Mobility Scheme

# 1 Introduction and Methodology

## 1.1 Context and background

This report presents a strategic framework for designing a sustainable researcher mobility scheme for the Western Balkans<sup>1</sup> (WB), building on the experience and lessons learnt from the Western Balkans Mobility Scheme (WBMS). The WBMS was a pilot initiative developed under the POLICY ANSWERS project – “R&I Policy Making, Implementation and Support in the Western Balkans” – launched on 1 March 2022 and funded under Horizon Europe.

A dedicated report on the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the WBMS pilot has been prepared separately and provides essential context for the present analysis. POLICY ANSWERS is aligned with the EU Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (WB Agenda), and aims to strengthen policy coordination within EU-WB cooperation whilst providing capacity building and pilot actions to support the region’s EU integration and enhance its innovation ecosystems. Alongside the WBMS, POLICY ANSWERS has developed complementary regional pilot measures, including a Regional Innovation Voucher Scheme, a Regional Promotion Campaign for Youth, a Regional Promoter Scheme for Research Infrastructures and a Regional Innovation Academy.

The need for such a scheme responds to pressing challenges in STEM workforce capacity across the WB, which are exacerbated by structural deficiencies in local education systems and persistently high rates of skilled emigration – commonly referred to as “brain drain”. Between 2010 and 2019, all six WB economies experienced net emigration, with nearly 20 % of Albania’s population leaving in the first 15 years of this century (Aspen Institute Germany, 2020)<sup>2</sup>, and over 2.5 million people leaving the region over the last decade (Global Voices, 2025)<sup>3</sup>. Unlike previous migration waves, this exodus predominantly involves educated youth in fields such as IT, engineering and medicine, directly limiting foreign investment potential and adding pressure to critical sectors (Aspen Institute Germany, 2020; Global Voices, 2025). Moreover, the region faces a digital skills gap; a 2024 European Training Foundation (ETF) survey reported participation in digital skills training at only 33 %, compared to the EU average of 42 %, indicating insufficient workplace upskilling efforts (ETF, 2024)<sup>4</sup>. Migration aspirations remain high, with 43 % of young Albanians expressing strong intentions to emigrate (German Marshall Fund, 2022)<sup>5</sup>.

Given this context, structured academic and professional mobility is strategically critical for the region’s long-term development. Rather than attempting to halt emigration, which is largely unfeasible (RYCO, 2025)<sup>6</sup>, a well-designed mobility scheme promotes “brain circulation”: leveraging the movement of highly skilled individuals to transfer expertise, global best practices and innovation into the WB, whilst creating attractive local opportunities for researchers. Through a targeted mobility programme aligned with regional needs, such an initiative could strengthen the local innovation ecosystem, enhance career prospects for researchers and gradually reduce the structural pressures driving permanent emigration – thereby converting the

---

<sup>1</sup> The Western Balkans comprise Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence)

<sup>2</sup> Aspen Institute Germany. (2020). Emigration from the Western Balkans.

<sup>3</sup> Global Voices. (2025). A generation on the move: how the brain drain is reshaping the Western Balkans.

<sup>4</sup> European Training Foundation (ETF). (2024). ETF Survey on Jobs & Skills in the Western Balkans highlights the digital training gap.

<sup>5</sup> German Marshall Fund (GMF). (2022). Toward a New Youth Brain-drain Paradigm in the Western Balkans

<sup>6</sup> Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). (2025). Brain-Drain Policy Brief.

challenge of brain drain into a catalyst for sustainable regional development (RYCO, 2025; ETF, 2023).

## 1.2 Report objectives

The primary goal of this report is to provide a comprehensive strategic framework by addressing the following key questions:

- What critical insights emerged from consultations with regional experts regarding optimal programme design?
- What business revenue model and sustainability strategy could be adopted?
- Which legal entity (Association or Foundation) is the most viable and sustainable operational model?

## 1.3 Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on a three-strand methodological approach, combining desk research, comparative legal analysis and qualitative stakeholder consultations.

- The desk research strand involved a review of existing STEM researcher mobility programmes at regional and European level, including comparable EU-funded schemes, relevant policy frameworks and academic literature on brain drain, brain circulation and sustainable funding models for research mobility.
- The comparative legal analysis examined the regulatory environments and administrative requirements applicable to the two principal institutional models – Foundation and Association – with particular attention to the German legal context, given its relevance to the proposed institutional location discussed in Section 5.
- The qualitative consultations comprised in-depth interviews with eleven regional experts and stakeholders, representing research institutions, funding bodies, youth organisations and policy actors across the WB and beyond. Interviews were conducted on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide (see Annex), focusing on programme design preferences, sustainability concerns and institutional governance. The full list of experts consulted is provided in Section 3.1. It should be noted that no expert from Albania or Kosovo was consulted in the course of this research. This represents a limitation of the present study, and the findings and recommendations should be read with this in mind. The authors recommend that future iterations of this work incorporate perspectives from experts with direct experience of research and innovation policy in these economies.

## 2 Regional Analysis and Business Revenue Model

### 2.1 Foundation versus Association: comparative analysis

The choice of legal entity is a foundational decision that shapes the organisation’s administrative structure, financial obligations and governance requirements. Two principal models are considered in this analysis: the Foundation (German: “Stiftung”) and the Association (German: “Verein/Verband”) under German law. The following comparison examines these models across six dimensions – definition, founding requirements, legal structure, adaptability, funding and governance – to provide a structured basis for the institutional recommendation presented in Section 5.

Table 1: Aspect of Foundation versus Association: a comparative analysis

Aspect	Foundation	Association
Definition	Permanent legal entity with dedicated assets for a specific, fixed purpose <sup>7,8</sup>	Association of people pursuing a joint purpose; established through membership and democratic decision-making <sup>9,10</sup>
Founding requirements	Requires significant initial capital (often EUR 50,000 to EUR 1 Mio.), formal charter, approval by foundation authority <sup>11</sup>	Can be founded by as few as seven people, low/no minimum capital, simple and inexpensive to set up
Legal structure	No members, founders have no ongoing voting rights after establishment; governed by board/board of trustees <sup>12</sup>	Has members with voting rights, governed by elected board; ultimate control rests with the membership assembly
Adaptability	Fixed purpose; changes to statutes or dissolution very difficult	Flexible purpose; statutes and goals can be changed democratically by members
Funding	Financed through investment returns from permanent	Funded by membership fees, donations, grants, and possibly commercial

<sup>7</sup> Kanzlei Herfurtner. Stiftung vs. Verein: Vor- und Nachteile auf einen Blick. <https://kanzlei-herfurtner.de/stiftung-vs-verein/>. Accessed 06 February 2026.

<sup>8</sup> Eselgrim und Partner Steuerberater mbH. Gemeinnützige Körperschaften, Verein, gGmbH, Stiftung und Co. <https://stb-eselgrim.de/steuerkanzlei/gemeinnuetzig/koerperschaften.php>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>9</sup> SkalaCAMPUS. Verein, Stiftung, gGmbH: Welche Rechtsform passt zu euch? <https://www.skala-campus.org/artikel/verein-stiftung-ggmbh-welche-rechtsform-passt-zu-euch/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>10</sup> ehrenamt24. Rechtsform im Verein. <https://www.ehrenamt24.de/wissen-fuer-vereine/vereinswiki/ueberblick-der-vereinsformen/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Wetando Unternehmensberatung. Gründung Stiftung, Verein und Gemeinnützige GmbH. Bedarfsanalyse. Rechtsformwahl. Gründung. <https://wetando.de/gruendung-stiftung-verein/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>12</sup> Accosis. Stiftung und Verein Teil 2: die gemeinnützige Stiftung. <https://www.acconsis.de/stiftung-und-verein-teil-2-die-gemeinnuetzige-stiftung/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

	endowment; endowment must be preserved	activities; no obligation to preserve a core endowment
Supervision	Subject to supervision by state foundation authorities; strict controls and administrative demands	Internal control by members and board; subject to registration and reporting to financial authorities when charitable
Ongoing obligations	High administrative requirements; annual reporting, external audits may be required; must ensure asset preservation	Lower administrative burden; main duties are regular memberships and reporting when charitable
Governance	Managed by a board/trustees per statute, not by founders or donors	Managed by elected board; ultimate authority is the member assembly, basic democratic structure
Main advantages	Perpetual fulfilment of a dedicated purpose, independence from membership changes, high stability, potential for tax benefits	Highly flexible, easy and low-cost to establish, responsive to member needs, democratic participation, tax benefits

### 2.1.1 Key comparative points

Based on the legal characteristics applicable in Germany, the choice between a Foundation and an Association hinge on three core strategic factors: longevity, resource dependency and flexibility.

Table 2: Aspect of Foundation and Association from our research and understanding from the interviews

Aspect	Stiftung (Foundation)	Verein/Verband (Association)
<b>Stability vs. Adaptability</b>	<b>High Stability:</b> Characterised by a permanent, fixed purpose, often in perpetuity. Changing the statutes or dissolving the entity is exceptionally difficult.	<b>High Adaptability:</b> The purpose, statutes, and goals can be changed democratically by the members, allowing the entity to respond quickly to new needs or external changes.
<b>Resource Dependency</b>	<b>Asset-Driven:</b> Financed by the returns from a large, permanent endowment ( <b>Significant initial capital</b> required, often EUR 50,000 to EUR 1 Mio.). The core capital must be preserved, ensuring financial independence from current economic conditions.	<b>Membership-Driven:</b> Financed primarily by membership fees, grants, and donations. Requires low or no minimum initial capital, but its operational budget relies on continuous fundraising and membership engagement.

<b>Governance and Control</b>	<b>Non-Democratic:</b> Governed by an appointed board/board of trustees according to the formal charter. Founders and donors have no ongoing voting rights after establishment. Subject to <b>strict supervision</b> by foundation authorities.	<b>Democratic:</b> Governed by an elected board, with ultimate control resting with the <b>membership assembly</b> . Decisions are made by members. Subject to internal control, with lower overall administrative supervision.
<b>Administrative Burden</b>	<b>High:</b> Requires annual reporting, potential external audits, and meticulous asset preservation to meet strict regulatory demands.	<b>Lower:</b> Main duties revolve around managing regular memberships and meeting reporting requirements related to charitable status.

### 2.1.2 Strategic conclusion

- The **Foundation (Stiftung)** model is best suited for organisations requiring **absolute long-term stability** and financial independence, where the goal is fixed and requires the permanent preservation of core capital.
- The **Association (Verein/Verband)** model is ideal for initiatives needing **flexibility, low initial cost** and democratic participation, where the ongoing purpose may need to evolve based on the needs of its members or regional stakeholders.

## 2.2 The sustainable business revenue model: blended funding

### A blended, sustainable and scalable funding framework

The long-term sustainability of the Western Balkans Mobility Scheme (WBMS) requires a diversified business revenue model that minimises dependency on single funding sources and ensures operational continuity beyond short-term project cycles. Literature on research and innovation (R&I) financing consistently highlights blended funding models as the most resilient approach for mobility and capacity-building initiatives, particularly in emerging and transition regions<sup>13</sup>. In line with expert consultations and comparative best practices, the follow-up projects or stakeholders interested and active in the WB should adopt a multi-pillar revenue structure combining public funding, private-sector co-financing, philanthropy and cost-sharing mechanisms.

#### 2.2.1 Public and European funding (anchor funding stream)

Public and European funding should serve as the **primary anchor** of the revenue model, especially during the establishment and early scaling phases. Key sources include:

- **EU-level instruments** such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and Digital Europe;
- **National funding schemes**, particularly German federal and state programmes supporting international research cooperation and talent mobility;

<sup>13</sup> European Commission. (2022). Blended Finance Instruments for Innovation and Skills.

- **Bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes** targeting EU-Western Balkans integration.

Empirical evidence shows that public funding plays a critical role in de-risking early-stage mobility initiatives and attracting complementary private investment<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, alignment with EU policy frameworks enhances legitimacy, policy coherence, and long-term scalability.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.2.2 Industry and corporate co-funding (demand-driven revenue)

The second revenue pillar is industry and corporate co-funding, which strengthens the link between mobility, skills acquisition, and labour-market relevance. Revenue mechanisms include:

- Co-funded industrial fellowships and internships;
- Corporate sponsorship of thematic mobility tracks;
- Strategic talent pipeline partnerships.

Research indicates that industry engagement improves employability outcomes, accelerates technology transfer and enhances return-on-investment for mobility programmes.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.2.3 Philanthropy, diaspora and private donations (stability and flexibility)

Philanthropic funding constitutes a flexible and counter-cyclical revenue stream, particularly important for supporting first-generation students, underrepresented groups, and high-potential graduates. This includes:

- Individual and diaspora donations;
- Contributions from philanthropic foundations;
- Named or legacy fellowship schemes.

Studies highlight the growing importance of diaspora philanthropy in supporting higher education and innovation ecosystems in the WB.<sup>17</sup> Germany's transparent legal and tax framework further facilitates philanthropic engagement by providing tax incentives and strong donor protection.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> European Commission. (2021). Towards a Sustainable Research Mobility Framework.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission. (2020). A New ERA for Research and Innovation.

<sup>16</sup> OECD (2019). University-Industry Collaboration: New Evidence and Policy Options, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e9c1e648-en>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission. (2023). Study of the Diasporas' Contributions to the Socio-Economic Development in the Western Balkans: ECONDIAS Final Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Authors: A. Qaisrani, B. Perchinig, J. Jokić-Bornstein, M. Hendow, V. Bilger and V. Kobzeva.

<sup>18</sup> Giving Europe. [https://www.transnationalgiving.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TGE\\_EFC\\_CountryProfile\\_Germany.pdf](https://www.transnationalgiving.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TGE_EFC_CountryProfile_Germany.pdf). Accessed: 09 February 2026.

## 2.2.4 Institutional memberships and partnership fees (operational sustainability)

A complementary revenue stream can be generated through institutional participation<sup>19</sup>, including:

- Membership or partnership fees from universities and research institutes;
- Service-based contributions for mobility coordination, matchmaking, and talent scouting.

While modest in financial volume, institutional contributions enhance stakeholder ownership and network stability, which literature identifies as critical for long-term ecosystem building.

One more way to approach this would be Programme-Linked Cost Recovery and Co-Payments (Efficiency Mechanism). To maximise reach and financial efficiency, the model incorporates partial cost recovery mechanisms, such as:

- Co-payments by host institutions or companies;
- Top-up funding to complement existing scholarships or national mobility schemes.

Cost-sharing models are widely recommended for mobility programmes to improve sustainability without limiting access, provided that merit-based selection and inclusivity are preserved.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2.5 Financial governance and risk mitigation

Financial sustainability is reinforced through:

- Independent audits and transparent reporting;
- Diversification thresholds to avoid donor dependency;
- Multi-year financial planning and reserve policies.

Strong governance and transparency are repeatedly identified as decisive factors for donor trust and institutional credibility in foundation-based models.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.3 Strategic summary

The proposed business revenue model is blended, diversified, and evidence-based, combining public anchor funding, industry co-financing, philanthropic support, institutional participation, and cost-sharing mechanisms. Anchored in Germany's robust legal and financial environment, this model aligns with international best practices and provides a scalable foundation for long-term STEM mobility, talent retention, and brain circulation in the WB.

<sup>19</sup> Rahman, M. (2025). Revenue Diversification in Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Literature Review.

<sup>20</sup> Lundsgaarde, E. (2023). The future of EU blended finance and guarantees: An assessment of cooperation strategies with least developed countries in Africa (IDOS Discussion Paper 2/2023). Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). DOI: 10.23661/idp2.2023. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>21</sup> Djuričin, S., Beraha, I., Jovanović, O., Mošurović, M., Lazarević, M., and Paunović, M. (2022). The efficiency of national innovation policy programmes: The case of Serbia. *Sustainability*, 14(14), 8483. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14148483>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

## 3 Expert Insights and Strategic Programme Design



Figure 1: Expert insights

### 3.1 Experts consultations

#### 3.1.1 Adna Ašić



Figure 2: Adna Ašić from Verlab Institute

Verlab Institute, based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a multidisciplinary research organisation focused on biomedical engineering, genetics, artificial intelligence (AI), digital health, and personalised medicine, with strong engagement in EU-funded frameworks such as Horizon Europe, COST Actions, Erasmus+ and EIT. Adna Ašić, a scientific collaborator and project manager at Verlab Institute, holds a PhD in personalised medicine and has extensive experience

in genetics, bioinformatics, and EU project coordination, including leadership roles within COST networks. Together, Verlab Institute and Ašić represent a credible example of how a private and industry-owned Western Balkan research institute can successfully combine scientific excellence, international collaboration, capacity building, and training of young researchers, making them highly relevant as a reference point or potential partner for mobility, STEM capacity-building, and regional talent-development initiatives.

### 3.1.2 Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić



Figure 3: Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić from Verlab Institute

Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić is a biomedical engineer and research leader from Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, serving as the Director (CEO) of the Verlab Research Institute for Biomedical Engineering, Medical Devices and Artificial Intelligence. She holds a BSc and MSc from the University of Sarajevo (electrical engineering) and a PhD in biomedical engineering from International Burch University, with expertise in medical devices, AI applications in healthcare, and measurement science. As director, she leads national and international research projects, drives digital transformation in health and technology, and contributes to advanced scientific events and networks in the region. She is also active in academic roles as a professor at International Burch University and University Donja Gorica, and in professional organisations such as the Bosnia and Herzegovina Medical and Biological Engineering Society, which connects to global bodies like IFMBE and EAMBES. Under her leadership, Verlab has engaged with initiatives like the National Competence Centre for High-Performance Computing (EUROCC4SEE) and participates in European innovation events, reflecting her role in advancing research, innovation and AI integration in healthcare across Bosnia and the WB.

### 3.1.3 Agata Pernuš



*Figure 4: Agata Pernuš*

Agata Pernuš Voigt, originally from Ljubljana, Slovenia, conducted her doctoral research in biology at the German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ) in Heidelberg, Germany, after finishing the Electrical Engineering studies in Slovenia. After her PhD, she has worked for the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, a major international research institution focused on molecular biology, where she worked for the International Relations Department. In this role she worked on coordinating projects and partnerships across EMBL member states, managing international scientific collaborations and EU-funded projects.

### 3.1.4 Klaus Rümmele



*Figure 5: Klaus Rümmele from KIT University*

Klaus Rümmele is the Head of the International Affairs Business Unit (INTL) at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) in Germany, where he leads internationalisation efforts, global cooperation, and communication strategies to strengthen KIT's international partnerships and academic mobility. In this role, he oversees services for international students and researchers, develops strategic linkages with global partner institutions, and contributes to initiatives that enhance cross-border academic exchange and collaboration. Klaus Rümmele has also engaged in international dialogues and presentations about higher education systems and institutional cooperation, and he emphasises inclusive practices such as bilingual documentation to support

KIT's diverse international community. His work reflects a broader commitment to fostering strategic research partnerships, mobility, and sustainable global academic networks<sup>22</sup>.

### 3.1.5 Branka Žižić



Figure 6: Branka Žižić from the University of Montenegro

Branka Žižić is project manager of European University Alliance Ulysseus at the University of Montenegro. At the interview time, she served also as EIT Community Officer for Montenegro. Previously, she worked in the Government of Montenegro's Ministry of Science involved in innovation, research, and technological development policy. She has served as Director-General for Innovation and Technological Development, coordinating public consultations on innovation laws and incentive frameworks to strengthen Montenegro's national innovation system<sup>23</sup>.

### 3.1.6 Jelena Vesić



Figure 7: Jelena Vesić from JSI

Jelena Vesić is a Slovenian physicist and professional scientific associate at the Jožef Stefan Institute (JSI) in Ljubljana, specializing in experimental nuclear structure physics, nuclear astrophysics, and instrumentation, with a PhD from the University of Ljubljana and prior postdoctoral research experience at GSI Helmholtzzentrum für Schwerionenforschung in

<sup>22</sup> Karlsruhe Institut für Technologie. [https://www.intl.kit.edu/intl/3760\\_9607.php](https://www.intl.kit.edu/intl/3760_9607.php). Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>23</sup> Public call for consultation of the interested public - drafting the Proposal for a Law on Incentives for Research and Innovation Development. (2020). <https://www.gov.me/en/article/224595--public-call-for-consultation-of-the-interested-public-drafting-the-proposal-for-a-law-on-incentives-for-research-and-innovation?utm>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

Germany. Her work includes contributions to research on hadronic systems, accelerator applications, and projects such as HITRI, highlighting her involvement in cutting-edge nuclear science and international collaboration in research infrastructures<sup>24</sup>.

### 3.1.7 Jing Fang



Figure 8: Jing Fang from UNESCO

Jing Fang is a Project Officer in the Science Unit at the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, based in Venice, Italy. She is an international development specialist with over 12 years of experience in science and sustainability policy. She has worked with UNESCO since 2017 and brings over a decade of experience from work with government ministries and universities in China before joining the organisation. At UNESCO, her work focuses on scientific programmes and activities in areas such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), science, technology and innovation (STI), science diplomacy, climate change, biodiversity, and open science, and as project officer, she has spearheaded large-scale, multi-country initiatives and projects on sustainability across Europe and North America. She built partnerships with key partners of the region including the private sector. Since 2020, she is a core team member of the Environment and Climate Change issue-based coalition for Europe and Central Asia, co-chaired by UNESCO, UNEP, and UNECE and serves as a Focal Point for the Youth UNESCO Climate Action Network in the region, reflecting her engagement in both policy and youth-oriented scientific initiatives<sup>25</sup>. Prior to joining UNESCO in 2017, she worked within the government and academia, advancing initiatives at the intersection of science, sustainability, and education and associated UNESCO coordinated initiatives<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> Jozef Stefan Institute. F2 / Department of Low and Medium Energy Physics. Staff. Dr Jelena Vesić. <https://f2.ijs.si/en/information/staff/2020063009383898/dr-jelena-vesi%C4%87>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>25</sup> World Science Forum. Participants. Ms Jing Fang. <https://worldscienceforum.org/participants/fang-jing-64130>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

### 3.1.8 Tjaž Črnčec



*Figure 9: Tjaž Črnčec from Student and Youth Organisations*

Tjaž Črnčec is a student at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Law and has been active in student and youth organisations for several years. He was one of the speakers representing Slovenian Youth Organisations in the UN HQ. He has served in leadership roles within student governance, including involvement in the Student Organisation of the University of Ljubljana (ŠOU) and as a senator at the Law Faculty.

### 3.1.9 Isidora Beraha



*Figure 10: Isidora Beraha from Institute of Economic Sciences in Belgrade, Serbia*

Isidora Beraha is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Economic Sciences (Institut ekonomskih nauka) in Belgrade, Serbia, where she is a member of the Innovation Economics department and head of sector for fundamental research. She has an extensive research background in innovation economics, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), entrepreneurship, and local economic development, and has published multiple scientific papers and co-authored monographs in these fields.

### 3.1.10 Kai Alexander Fornahl



Figure 11: Kai Alexander Fornahl from UFZ

Kai Alexander Fornahl is currently working at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research-UFZ (a major German research centre focused on environmental science) in Leipzig/Halle, Germany. He serves as project manager for *InHand@UFZ - Institutionalizing Research Security in International Scientific Cooperation*, which is a project aimed at developing tools, processes, and advisory services to raise awareness of risks in international scientific collaborations and to institutionalise research security practices at the UFZ.<sup>27</sup>

He is part of the ‘Research Infrastructures, International Cooperation and Sustainability’ unit at UFZ, where his role involves work on international cooperation, research security and supporting scientists with strategies and processes related to risk and opportunity assessments in international projects.

### 3.1.11 Maida Hadžiabdić and Nina Begović



Figure 12: Maida Hadžiabdić and Nina Begović of University of Sarajevo

---

<sup>27</sup> UFZ Helmholtz. Centre for Environmental Research. InHand@UFZ. Research Security in International Cooperation. <https://www.ufz.de/index.php?en=50875&utm>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

Nina Begović and Maida Hadžiabdić work at the Research Support Office at the University of Sarajevo, where they provide administrative and strategic support for the university's research activities. Nina Begović serves as the head of the office, overseeing the coordination of research projects, assisting faculty with grant applications, and managing the university's participation in international programmes such as the EU Horizon initiatives. Maida Hadžiabdić works as a research support officer, focusing on logistical and administrative tasks, including preparing project documentation, monitoring deadlines, and facilitating communication with researchers. Both have participated in international training and collaboration programmes, strengthening the university's engagement with global research networks.

## 3.2 Key findings from expert consultations

### 3.2.1 Key points from Adna Ašić

Based on insights provided by Adna Ašić, associations or NGOs represent the most realistic and already well-established organisational model in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as they offer greater flexibility, legal clarity and easier access to diverse funding sources, while foundations remain less commonly used and would require more comprehensive legal and regulatory analysis. She emphasised that establishing a single central hub in the WB would be the most efficient way to serve all six WB economies (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo), enabling coordinated regional outreach and reduced operational complexity. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of adopting a multi-source funding model, combining local public funds, European Union programmes, private-sector sponsorship and support from international development agencies. Finally, due to existing risks related to NGO misuse in the region, strong governance, transparency and accountability mechanisms were identified as essential to ensure institutional credibility, effective implementation, and long-term sustainability.

### 3.2.2 Key points from Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić

Based on Lejla Gurbeta Pokvić's insights, associations are recommended over foundations in the WB due to their simpler legal setup, inclusiveness and access to diverse funding sources. Trust and credibility are critical, as donors prefer transparent governance led by role models rather than rigid administrators. Sustainability of support should balance fairness and reach, offering one-time grants with possible extensions while prioritising first-time beneficiaries, and housing support is a vital intervention to reduce mobility barriers. Capacity building in grant writing and project management is essential to empower young researchers and strengthen long-term independence. The association's value proposition should be clear for both researchers providing opportunities, internships, and funding and for companies or institutions offering access to talent and innovation. Programme design should focus on mobility and research grants, housing cost coverage and prioritisation of new beneficiaries, while the funding strategy should combine local government programmes, EU calls, corporate CSR, tax incentives and diaspora contributions. Finally, branding should emphasise the association as a "talent connector" between young researchers and companies, rather than solely as a scholarship provider.

### 3.2.3 Key points from Agata Pernuš Voigt

Based on Agata Pernuš Voigt 's insights, the current situation for STEM students in Slovenia shows a notable attrition from academia, as many students perceive faster career growth and higher salaries in industry and relatively few pursue studies abroad. She emphasised that support is less needed at the Bachelor/Master level, but targeted actions are required to make scientific research and academic careers more attractive. For establishing a regional hub, an association is recommended to enable effective outreach and network building across multiple WB, with a decentralised model including local representatives in each economy. While Slovenia could serve as a regional model, bureaucratic challenges make it less suitable as the main legal office, which is better located where administrative support and expertise are stronger, such as Germany. Funding in Slovenia should be approached strategically by highlighting mutual benefits to relevant companies, and the association's activities should focus on increasing engagement in academia through mentorship, research opportunities and grants for early-career researchers.

### 3.2.4 Key points from Klaus Rümmele.

Based on Klaus Rümmele's insights, the preferred model for supporting STEM student mobility from the WB is a foundation, as KIT's experience shows that foundations are more effective for providing financial support for research stays and internships. The easiest legal setup for such a foundation is in Germany, with Switzerland and Austria as secondary options, while establishing it directly in the WB poses higher legal challenges. The proposed operational structure involves a strong executive board including representatives from GSI/FAIR, local government, and industry overseeing a small operating team responsible for day-to-day management, rather than relying on a single CEO. The immediate priorities include developing a clear concept for the research stays, defining student profiles, duration, and potential career benefits, and exploring collaboration with existing foundations that GSI/FAIR is already connected to. Additionally, including Western Balkan partners in the governing board and considering Erasmus exchanges as initial steps for mobility programmes were recommended to strengthen regional outreach and partnerships.

### 3.2.5 Key points from Branka Žižić

Based on the discussion, the recommended approach for supporting young WB students' access to European research infrastructures is the establishment of a foundation rather than an association, as foundations offer greater financial stability, long-term continuity, and reduced dependence on short-term projects. A hybrid organisational model is advised, with the main headquarters located in the founder's economy and a regional presence in the WB such as Montenegro, which is strategically well positioned despite its service-based economy. Sustainable funding should rely on a diversified mix of core founding donors, public funding, EU programmes and private-sector partnerships. Establishing a local foundation in Montenegro is considered relatively straightforward, whereas creating an international organisation would involve more complex legal procedures. Key next steps include defining a clear vision and mission, securing long-term sponsors, gathering institutional support from research infrastructures and governments, involving students in advisory or governance roles and implementing a lean governance structure supported by targeted industry partnerships.

### 3.2.6 Key points from Jelena Vesić

Based on Jelena Vesić's input, the foundation should be legally and operationally established in Germany, as it offers a strong and transparent legal framework, tax clarity, and a neutral position for managing funds, partnerships, and selection processes across all WB. A foundation model is preferred over an association due to its long-term, vision-driven nature and stronger credibility among scientific institutions and donors. She recommends a hybrid operational structure with centralised governance in Germany and local contact persons in each target country to support outreach, administration, and mobility logistics. Funding should be diversified through German ministries, EU programmes, and private fundraising, while complementing existing scholarships through a top-up model. The foundation's core mission should promote brain circulation by supporting students, graduates, and early-career professionals, encouraging return and capacity building in home countries, and ensuring transparent, merit-based selection that also considers socio-economic background, with an initial focus on fellowships rather than grants.

### 3.2.7 Key points from Jing Fang

Jing Fang emphasised that decisions on location, legal form, and governance should be based on an objective, evidence-based feasibility study rather than opinions or voting. She highlighted the need for clear indicators, data collection, scoring systems, and transparency to ensure credibility. Key considerations include legal and tax frameworks, governance, financial sustainability, accessibility, and donor mapping. UNESCO does not directly fund new foundations but may provide support through NGO networks and partnerships once a formal entity is established.

### 3.2.8 Key points from Tjaz Crncec

The interview with Tjaž Crncec, a law student and representative of a large student organisation in Ljubljana, highlighted Slovenia as a strategic hub for supporting STEM students from the WB. The country offers strong STEM infrastructure, a ready talent pool of WB students, cultural and linguistic familiarity and EU regulatory advantages, making it a favourable location for establishing a German-backed foundation or alliance. While public funding is available through student fees and scholarships from major Slovenian companies, identifying private donors would require targeted research. The interview emphasised leveraging existing student networks, collaborating with local scholarship foundations, and conducting formal legal and tax investigations to ensure the feasibility of creating an operational hub in Slovenia for research mobility programmes like those at GSI/FAIR.

### 3.2.9 Key points from Isidora Beraha

In an interview, Isidora Beraha emphasised that foundations are highly effective instruments for supporting mobility, talent development, and regional cooperation in the WB, offering long-term planning, transparent governance, and the ability to pool resources from multiple donors. While the legal framework generally aligns with European standards, practical implementation can be complex, requiring careful jurisdiction selection, compliance with anti-money-laundering regulations, and clear public-benefit mandates. Financial challenges include limited tax incentives, strict banking controls, and underdeveloped philanthropy, making diversified funding

from EU and bilateral donors, private sector CSR, universities and diaspora contributions essential. She recommended a governance model with an independent board, executive management, specialised programme units, advisory bodies and robust monitoring systems to ensure credibility and professionalism. Isidora Beraha highlighted that the foundations provide continuity, autonomy, and transparency, while risks such as administrative complexity and cross-border operational difficulties can be mitigated through strong governance and strategic planning. For the initial phase, she advised starting with a clear mission and programme design, scaling gradually and building the organisational structure around concrete beneficiary needs to create a sustainable, impactful regional institution.

### **3.2.10 Key points from Kai Alexander Fornahl**

Kai Fornahl recommended establishing the initial office in Germany due to its strong legal framework, governance familiarity and ease of setting up contracts and entities, while smaller hubs or partner offices in the WB could support local engagement. Regarding organisational form, foundations (Stiftung) are better suited for structured funding and long-term sustainability but require initial assets and more complex setup, whereas associations (Verein) are more flexible and network-based but may face limitations in funding and operations. A non-profit GmbH (gGmbH) offers a practical alternative with lower setup complexity and eligibility for tax benefits. He emphasised that decisions should be based on a clear mapping of objectives, resources, legal requirements, and long-term sustainability, supported by local presence, partnerships, and professional legal advice to ensure compliance and operational effectiveness.

### **3.2.11 Key points from Maida Hadžiabdić and Nina Begović**

The discussion focused on establishing a foundation to support young researchers and students, particularly from the WB, who face limited funding and opportunities, especially graduates. The foundation envisions a “triple win” model benefiting individuals, the foundation, and funders, with resources coming from private donors, companies, public institutions or membership fees, ideally channelled directly to beneficiaries or partner institutions to reduce bureaucracy. Emphasis is placed on mobility and capacity-building programmes that go beyond financial support to include outreach, awareness and institutional facilitation. Programmes should be flexible in duration (2-12 months), accommodate semester breaks or thesis schedules and prioritise full-time availability for graduates, addressing challenges posed by decentralised university procedures, short-term fellowships and administrative hurdles. By focusing on inclusivity, visibility and minimising paperwork, the foundation aims to foster young talent, provide targeted and open support and maximise participation and engagement despite operational and regional challenges.

## **3.3 Talent retention and brain circulation**

The programme should be explicitly designed to mitigate brain drain by fostering brain circulation, ensuring that international mobility leads to the return of knowledge, skills, and professional networks to the home economy. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider WB, this requires creating clear pathways that connect study or work experiences abroad with attractive career opportunities at home. Mobility should not result in permanent

emigration, but rather function as a strategic component of a sustainable talent development ecosystem that responds to local economic and industrial needs.

The programme structure should therefore include mandatory industrial internships or fellowships of approximately 6-10 weeks at partner companies, either domestically or abroad. These placements would provide hands-on, real-world exposure and access to state-of-the-art technologies and practices that are not yet widely available locally, such as renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, and advanced technologies. By embedding undergraduate and postgraduate researchers (aged 18-35) directly in industry environments, the programme would help bridge the skills gap between academia and the private sector, improve employability, and clarify career pathways within the regional labour market.

Retention should be driven by positive incentives rather than difficult-to-enforce contractual obligations, such as mandatory return clauses or repayment requirements. Sustainable retention can be achieved by creating compelling local career prospects, involving companies early in talent development, and offering clear post-mobility professional opportunities. Through co-funding and active engagement of major Bosnian companies, the programme can strengthen participants' ties to the local innovation ecosystem while enabling companies to develop future-ready talent. This incentive-based approach aligns with the vision of an independent and transparent foundation or association that not only supports mobility but also ensures that investments in young researchers generate long-term value for the region's economic development and competitiveness.

## 4 Conclusions and Action Roadmap

### 4.1 Summary of key findings

The analysis of expert interviews and stakeholder inputs demonstrates that the successful establishment of a STEM capacity and mobility programme for the WB depends on an integrated, regionally coordinated, and credibility-driven institutional model.

First, organisational form and governance are decisive. While opinions differ between association- and foundation-based models, there is broad consensus that legal clarity, transparency and strong governance mechanisms are non-negotiable. Associations are widely recognised as the most practical and flexible structure in much of the WB, offering easier establishment, inclusiveness and access to diverse funding streams. At the same time, foundations are viewed by several experts as better suited for long-term financial stability, credibility with donors, and sustained mobility funding, particularly when legally established in jurisdictions such as Germany that provide robust legal and tax frameworks. Across both models, the need for independent boards, clear accountability, merit-based selection and safeguards against misuse is emphasised as essential for institutional legitimacy.

Second, there is strong alignment around the need for a centralised regional hub combined with decentralised local outreach. A single coordinating entity serving all six WB economies is seen as the most efficient approach, reducing fragmentation while enabling strategic partnerships with European research infrastructures and industry. This central hub should be supported by local representatives or contact points in each economy to ensure accessibility, cultural relevance, and effective talent identification.

Third, all contributors highlight the importance of a blended, multi-source funding model. Reliance on a single funding stream is considered unsustainable. Instead, the programme should combine local public funding, European Union instruments, private-sector and corporate CSR contributions, international development agencies, diaspora engagement and where relevant co-funding by industry partners. Such diversification not only increases financial resilience but also strengthens stakeholder ownership and alignment with regional economic needs. It should be noted, however, that blended funding also introduces administrative complexity: different funding streams typically operate on different timelines, carry distinct reporting requirements and impose varied eligibility conditions. Demonstrating the absence of double financing across multiple sources requires careful coordination. These operational challenges must be anticipated in the governance design of any future scheme.

Fourth, the programmatic focus must be sharply aligned with industry-relevant skill acquisition and mobility. Rather than broad or purely academic support, the initiative should prioritise targeted research stays, industrial internships, fellowships, and mobility grants for students and early-career researchers. Coverage of practical barriers particularly housing and living costs is identified as a high-impact intervention. Capacity building in grant writing, project management, and professional skills is also critical to empower beneficiaries beyond the duration of individual grants.

Finally, the overarching strategic objective is talent retention through brain circulation, not restriction of mobility. Experts consistently reject rigid return obligations in favour of incentive-based models that create attractive local career pathways. By embedding industry early in

talent development, positioning the organisation as a “talent connector,” and aligning mobility experiences with concrete post-programme opportunities, the initiative can ensure that international exposure translates into long-term value for the WB’ research ecosystems, innovation capacity, and economic competitiveness.

Taken together, these findings confirm that impact will depend not on a single legal form or funding source, but on a coherent system that integrates governance credibility, regional coordination, diversified financing, and industry-aligned programme design into a sustainable STEM capacity-building framework for the WB.

## 4.2 Action-oriented recommendations

Building on the consolidated findings from expert consultations and the strategic objectives outlined across chapters 2, 3 and 4, the following action-oriented recommendations are proposed to guide the project team toward implementation. These steps are designed to remain flexible with respect to the final legal form (association, foundation or hybrid model), while ensuring early progress, credibility, and alignment with regional and European stakeholders.

### 1. Legal and governance finalisation

Initiate a structured legal feasibility and decision process to finalise the most appropriate institutional model. This should include drafting statutes and governance frameworks that prioritise transparency, accountability and independence from single-donor influence. Regardless of whether an association, foundation, or hybrid structure is selected, the statutes should enable regional operation across all six WB, establish an independent governing board with academic, industry, and regional representation, and incorporate robust financial oversight and anti-misuse safeguards.

### 2. Pilot programme design and validation

Finalise the design of a pilot mobility and capacity building programme clearly aligned with industry needs and brain-circulation objectives. The pilot should include mandatory industry-linked components such as internships, research stays, or fellowships of approximately 6-10 weeks combined with targeted financial support (travel, housing and living costs). Selection criteria should be merit-based while also considering socio-economic background and prioritising first-time beneficiaries. Early validation with industry partners and research institutions is recommended to ensure relevance and employability outcomes.

### 3. Strategic corporate and industry engagement

Launch targeted, high-level engagement with a small number (3-5) of potential anchor partners from key regional and international industries (e.g., banking, telecommunications, energy, pharmaceuticals, advanced technologies). Outreach should be based on a clear value proposition that positions the initiative as a talent connector, offering companies early access to high-potential STEM talent, opportunities to shape future-ready skill profiles, and visible contributions to regional development and stability. These partners should be encouraged to co-fund internships, fellowships, or sector-specific pilot tracks.

#### 4. Diversified funding and grant strategy

Begin coordinated preparation of funding applications for upcoming EU, bilateral and international calls, positioning the initiative as a strategic instrument for regional integration, talent retention through brain circulation, and academia industry linkage. In parallel, map complementary funding sources such as local government programmes, corporate CSR budgets, diaspora contributions and philanthropic partners. Early alignment with German and EU funding instruments, as well as exploration of collaboration with existing foundations and mobility schemes, will increase both credibility and financial sustainability in the start-up phase.

Together, these steps provide a pragmatic and phased roadmap that translates the strategic insights from expert consultations into concrete actions. By advancing legal clarity, piloting industry-aligned mobility programmes, engaging anchor partners and securing diversified funding, the project team can establish a credible, scalable, and regionally impactful STEM capacity-building initiative for the WB.

## 5 Recommendation

### 5.1 Establishment of a foundation in Germany as the optimal institutional model

Based on the comprehensive regional analysis, expert consultations and evaluation of legal, operational and strategic factors, the recommended institutional model for the long-term implementation and scaling of a sustainable researcher mobility scheme for the WB is the establishment of a Foundation (Stiftung) in Germany. This recommendation is grounded in three mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (MECE) arguments: strategic ecosystem alignment, regulatory and administrative efficiency and long-term credibility and sustainability.

#### 5.1.1 Strategic ecosystem alignment: proximity to world-class research infrastructures

Germany hosts one of Europe's most significant large-scale research infrastructure ecosystems. The country's landscape includes the German Aerospace Center (DLR) – which coordinated the WBMS pilot – as well as world-class facilities such as FAIR, GSI and KIT, relevant to supporting the mobility of young researchers, namely FAIR (Facility for Antiproton and Ion Research) and GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research (GSI GmbH). These institutions represent not only scientific excellence but also a mature ecosystem combining fundamental research, applied science, industry collaboration, and international mobility. Establishing the foundation in Germany enables direct institutional anchoring within this ecosystem, facilitating structured access to cutting-edge laboratories, research infrastructures, industrial partners, and training environments that are largely unavailable in the WB. The presence of FAIR/GSI also provides immediate legitimacy, partnership potential, and scalability for mobility programmes, allowing the foundation to function as a trusted bridge between Western Balkan talent and top-tier European research and innovation environments.

#### 5.1.2 Regulatory and administrative efficiency: favourable legal framework

Expert interviews consistently highlighted that Germany offers a clearer, more predictable, and more efficient regulatory environment for establishing and operating a foundation compared to Western Balkan jurisdictions. German foundation law provides well-defined procedures, strong legal certainty, transparent governance requirements and established tax regulations, all of which reduce institutional risk for donors, partners, and beneficiaries. As noted by several experts, setting up and managing a foundation in Germany is administratively more straightforward, particularly for cross-border operations, international funding flows, and contractual relationships with universities, research infrastructures and industry. This regulatory efficiency lowers operational friction, accelerates implementation timelines, and enables the organisation to focus resources on programmatic impact rather than administrative navigation.

#### 5.1.3 Credibility, financial sustainability and international trust

A German-based foundation benefits from high international credibility, donor confidence, and financial transparency, which are critical for long-term sustainability. Germany's strong

reputation for governance, accountability and compliance significantly increases trust among European institutions, international donors, ministries, corporations and philanthropic actors. This credibility is especially important in the WB context, where concerns about governance risks and misuse of funds were repeatedly emphasised during consultations. By locating the foundation in Germany, the initiative can attract diversified and large-scale funding from EU programmes, federal ministries, industry partners, and international foundations, while operating with a neutral and transparent selection and monitoring system. This positioning supports the foundation's long-term mission of brain circulation, ensuring continuity beyond short-term projects and insulating the organisation from political or institutional volatility.

## 5.2 Concluding recommendation

Taken together, these three arguments demonstrate that establishing a Foundation in Germany is the most robust, credible, and future-proof option for a sustainable WB mobility scheme. Strategic proximity to leading research infrastructures, a favourable regulatory environment, and enhanced international trust collectively create a strong institutional backbone for sustainable mobility, capacity building and talent retention through brain circulation. While regional outreach and implementation should be supported through local contact points in the WB, the German-based foundation provides the optimal central anchor for governance, funding, and long-term impact.

## 6 References

- Aspen Institute Germany. (2020). *Emigration from the Western Balkans*. Berlin: Aspen Institute Germany.
- Djuričin, S., Beraha, I., Jovanović, O., Mošurović, M., Lazarević, M. and Paunović, M. (2022) 'The efficiency of national innovation policy programmes: The case of Serbia', *Sustainability*, 14(14), 8483. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14148483>.
- Ehrenamt24. (n.d.). *Überblick der Vereinsformen*. Available at: <https://www.ehrenamt24.de/wissen-fuer-vereine/vereinswiki/ueberblick-der-vereinsformen/> Accessed: 09 February 2026).
- European Commission. (2020). *A New ERA for Research and Innovation*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission (2021) *Towards a Sustainable Research Mobility Framework*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission (2022) *Blended Finance Instruments for Innovation and Skills*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission (2023) *Study of the Diasporas' Contributions to the Socio-Economic Development in the Western Balkans: ECONDIAS Final Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Training Foundation (ETF) (2024) *ETF Survey on Jobs & Skills in the Western Balkans highlights the digital training gap*. Turin: ETF.
- German Marshall Fund (GMF) (2022) *Toward a New Youth Brain-drain Paradigm in the Western Balkans*. Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund.
- Global Voices (2025) *A generation on the move: How the brain drain is reshaping the Western Balkans*. Available at: <https://globalvoices.org> Accessed: 09 February 2026).
- Herfurtner, A. (n.d.) *Stiftung vs. Verein*. Available at: <https://kanzlei-herfurtner.de/stiftung-vs-verein/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.
- INTL - Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (n.d.) *International Affairs at KIT*. Available at: [https://www.intl.kit.edu/intl/3760\\_9607.php](https://www.intl.kit.edu/intl/3760_9607.php). Accessed: 09 February 2026.
- Jožef Stefan Institute (n.d.) *Jelena Vesić*. Available at: <https://f2.ijs.si/en/information/staff/2020063009383898/dr-jelena-vesi%C4%87/> Accessed: 09 February 2026.
- Lundsgaarde, E. (2023) *The future of EU blended finance and guarantees: An assessment of cooperation strategies with least developed countries in Africa*. IDOS Discussion Paper 2/2023. Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp2.2023>.
- OECD (2019) *University-Industry Collaboration: New Evidence and Policy Options*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e9c1e648-en>.
- Rahman, M. (2025) 'Revenue diversification in higher education institutions: A systematic literature review' *BABUR Research*, 4(1), 157-181.
- Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) (2025) *Brain Drain Policy Brief*. Tirana: RYCO.

Skala-Campus (n.d.) *Verein, Stiftung, gGmbH - Welche Rechtsform passt zu euch?* Available at: <https://www.skala-campus.org/artikel/verein-stiftung-ggmbh-welche-rechtsform-passt-zu-euch/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

Steuerkanzlei Eselgrimm (n.d.) *Gemeinnützige Körperschaften*. Available at: <https://stb-eselgrimm.de/steuerkanzlei/gemeinnuetzig/koerperschaften.php>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

Transnational Giving Europe (2020) *Country Profile Germany*. Available at: [https://www.transnationalgiving.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TGE\\_EFC\\_CountryProfile\\_Germany.pdf](https://www.transnationalgiving.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TGE_EFC_CountryProfile_Germany.pdf). Accessed: 09 February 2026.

UFZ - Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (n.d.) *International Cooperation and Sustainability*. Available at: <https://www.ufz.de/index.php?en=50875>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

Wetando (n.d.) *Gründung: Stiftung oder Verein*. Available at: <https://wetando.de/gruendung-stiftung-verein/>. Accessed: 09 February 2026.

World Science Forum (n.d.) *Fang, Jing*. Available at: <https://worldscienceforum.org/participants/fang-jing-64130/>.

## 7 Appendices

### Interview Questions:

1. Based on your experience, what are the key advantages and disadvantages of choosing a Stiftung (foundation) compared to an e.V. (association) for international capacity building and mobility programmes?
2. Considering the legal and financial requirements, do you think the Western Balkan region is a suitable place to establish a foundation, or would another country (e.g., Germany, Austria, Switzerland) be more strategic? Why?
3. What do you think would be the most effective ways for us to secure funding and financial support for scholarships, research, and mobility programmes?
4. What are the main risks or challenges when registering and maintaining a Stiftung or foundation in the Western Balkans compared to Germany or Switzerland?
5. How important is flexibility in governance and purpose (as in an e.V.) versus stability and long-term dedication to a fixed mission (as in a Stiftung) for an organisation that wants to support scholarships, research, and mobility in the Western Balkans?
6. Does the availability of SEPA+ and cross-border transfer mechanisms make it easier for a foundation in the Western Balkans to collaborate and manage funds internationally, or are there still significant barriers?
7. If you were advising us, which legal form (Stiftung, e.V., or a local foundation/association in the Balkans) would you recommend as the most effective to achieve sustainable impact in education and research mobility and why?
8. If we decide to establish a Stiftung or e.V., what should we be most prepared for, and what would you recommend as the best organisational structure to ensure efficiency and sustainability?

Number	Interview Question Topic	Meaning / Purpose of the Question
1	Advantages and disadvantages of Stiftung vs. e.V.	To understand structural, legal, and operational differences between a foundation (Stiftung) and an association (e.V.) based on their Experiences
2	Best country to establish a foundation	To compare regulatory environment, credibility, financial obligations, and operational ease between the Western Balkans and countries like Germany, Austria, or Switzerland.
3	Securing funding and financial support	To identify practical strategies and funding sources such as grants, partnerships, donors and institutional cooperation.
4	Risks and challenges in registering and maintaining a foundation	To identify legal, bureaucratic, financial and administrative obstacles across different regions.

5	Flexibility vs. long-term mission stability	To evaluate whether adaptable governance (like in associations) or rigid mission-focused structures (like in foundations) better suits your goals.
6	SEPA+ and international financial collaboration	To understand whether modern financial transfer systems simplify international funding and cooperation for Balkan-based organisations.
7	To understand whether modern financial transfer systems simplify international funding and cooperation for Balkan-based organisations.	To gain expert strategic advice based on experience with non-profit governance, funding and regional operations.
8	Preparation and organisational structure	To learn about governance models, management structures, legal compliance and sustainability strategies.



## 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](http://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.

