



Open Call for Consulting Services

Title:	Consultant Support on Internationalisation of Higher Education and Skills Mobility in the Western Balkans Six
Subject:	Common Regional Market 2.0 – Technical Assistance
RCC Department:	Programme Department
Eligible :	Individual consultants
Reporting to:	Expert on Human Capital Development
Duration:	February - end of April 2026
Reference Number:	010-026

I Background

Western Balkans Six (WB6) continue to face systemic challenges in higher education, including limited international visibility, persistent misalignment between study programmes and labour-market needs, and uneven implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). Despite progress under the Bologna Process and the adoption of EU-compatible frameworks, higher education institutions in the region continue to lag behind their European and South East European peers in key areas related to quality, governance, and international attractiveness.

These challenges are compounded by sustained levels of emigration, which exacerbate skills shortages in strategic sectors such as healthcare, ICT, and the green economy. In this context, a regional Conference provides an opportunity to reinforce ministerial ownership, anticipate interest and endorsement for emerging priorities, create regional scale for domestic reforms, and bring together evidence, policy, and implementation experience, including lessons from South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC) Participants that have already navigated similar reform paths.

These priorities are in line with the relevant objectives of the South East Europe 2030 (SEE2030) Strategy adopted by the SEEC Summit in 2021, with a focus on strengthening regional cooperation and alignment with EU higher education and research frameworks; advancing internationalisation and mobility; enhancing quality culture and governance; and promoting academic excellence, research, and innovation in close partnership with industry. The discussions will also examine emerging approaches to performance-based financing and their relevance for the WB6.

II Objective of the assignment

In particular, the assignment shall support the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and its partners by:

- **Analysing key barriers and opportunities** affecting the internationalisation and international attractiveness of higher education institutions in the Western Balkans
- **Assessing system performance and structural gaps** relevant to the Conference priorities, including quality culture and governance, skills relevance and employability, student and academic mobility, university-industry collaboration, and research and innovation
- **Benchmarking the WB6** against a targeted, policy-relevant set of regional, EU, and international comparators, with a focus on internationalisation, mobility, quality assurance, governance, equity and inclusion, labour-market relevance, and sustainable and transparent financing of higher education and research
- **Examining emerging approaches to sustainable, performance-based and competitive financing** of higher education and research, drawing on relevant international and regional good practices and assessing their applicability to the WB6 context
- **Proposing policy measures and regional initiatives** that strengthen regional cooperation and align higher education and research reforms with EU frameworks, CRM 2.0 objectives, and the SEE2030 Strategy, while improving skills retention and labour-market relevance
- **Developing a prioritised and actionable set of recommendations** for the RCC and partners, including short- and medium-term measures to support regional collaboration, mobility, efficient resource use, and options for specialisation and shared regional solutions

III Description of tasks

The tasks below operationalise the analytical and policy objectives outlined in Section II.

Under the direct supervision of the RCC Secretariat, the Consultant shall be responsible for:

- **Providing analytical and policy inputs** to support the Conference agenda, including concise background analysis, benchmarking insights, and policy framing aligned with the Conference pillars
- **Supporting the preparation and structuring of Conference sessions**, including high-level panels and thematic breakout labs, ensuring coherence with the analytical findings
- **Conducting targeted desk research and data analysis** on higher education and research systems in the WB6, drawing on a policy-relevant set of indicators
- **Synthesising comparative findings** in a concise and accessible format suitable for ministerial-level discussion and decision-making
- **Formulating actionable policy options** to support post-Conference follow-up, including regional cooperation models (e.g. joint programmes, thematic research networks, shared resource approaches), measures to enhance international attractiveness and talent circulation, and financing reform options

- **Engaging with key stakeholders**, including the RCC, the World Bank, selected domestic authorities, quality assurance bodies, and academic representatives, to validate findings and ensure feasibility and policy relevance
- **Supporting Conference follow-up**, including contributions to the consolidation of conclusions, articulation of next steps for RCC programming and partner engagement, and conceptual groundwork for the Regional Network on Higher Education and Mobility (RNHEM)
- **Preparing final deliverables**, including a concise policy note and supporting analytical materials, clearly structured to inform RCC and partners' post-Conference actions and regional coordination

IV Methodology

The Consultant is expected to combine:

- Desk research, data analysis, and policy analysis;
- Comparative review of international and regional best practices;
- Stakeholder consultations;
- Drafting and refinement of deliverables in close coordination with the RCC Secretariat.

V Key indicators (targeted and policy-relevant selection)

The indicators listed below constitute a targeted, policy-relevant selection to support the analytical work under this assignment. They will be applied in a focused and proportionate manner, taking into account data availability and their direct relevance to the Conference priorities on internationalisation, mobility as operationalised through regional mobility agreements, quality culture and governance, labour-market relevance, and sustainable financing of higher education and research.

- Tertiary educational attainment (ages 25 - 34);
- Learning mobility in tertiary education, with a focus on the implementation, uptake, and outcomes of regional mobility agreements, including credit and degree mobility;
- Workload and ECTS structures (first and second cycles; short-cycle programmes, etc.);
- Quality assurance and recognition frameworks, including ESG alignment, foreign qualification recognition, and integration with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF);
- Equity and inclusion / social dimension, including access for underrepresented groups, financial support mechanisms, and gender balance among students and academic staff;
- Relevance and skills alignment with labour-market needs, including priority fields (e.g. ICT/STEM), transversal skills, and employability outcomes;
- University-industry partnerships, including collaboration on curriculum design, practical training, and applied research;
- Financing and research and development, including resource levels and mix, performance-based and competitive financing mechanisms, and research intensity and linkages.

VI Expected outputs

As part of the Technical Assistance component, and in line with CRM 2.0 and SEE2030 Strategy priorities, the Consultant shall contribute to the following outputs:

- **Policy Brief / Policy Note**, summarising key regional findings and policy recommendations on higher education internationalisation, mobility (as operationalised through regional mobility agreements), employability, and talent retention
- **Conference Conclusions Document**, a concise (up to 2 pages) outcome paper capturing key policy messages, ministerial commitments, and agreed follow-up actions, to be finalised post-Conference
- **Support to outreach and panel engagement**, including liaison with selected high-level speakers, quality assurance and ESG experts, and SEE/EU stakeholders; preparation of speaker briefs; and support to coordination of invitations to ensure balanced and policy-relevant panels
- **Cross-cutting thematic integration**, ensuring that internationalisation, quality assurance and ESG alignment, employability, and labour-market relevance are consistently reflected across Conference sessions and outputs
- **Post-Conference Report**, integrating analytical findings and Conference outcomes into final, decision-ready recommendations

VII Indicative timelines

The engagement is expected to start in February end in April 2026.

Phase 1 - **Inception and scoping** (mid-February): finalisation of scope and indicator set; confirmation of Conference needs; inception note.

Phase 2 - **Analysis and policy inputs** (late February – mid-March): desk review, WB6 benchmarking, identification of good practices, and preparation of analytical inputs for Conference sessions.

Phase 3 - **Conference support** (mid- to late March): final policy framing, support to Conference delivery, and capture of key policy messages.

Phase 4 - **Post-Conference** synthesis and reporting (April): integration of Conference outcomes and preparation of the final report and policy note.

VIII Profile of the Consultant

Core Qualifications

- Advanced degree in economics, public policy, education and science policy or a related discipline (PhD preferred, or an equivalent combination of education and experience).
- Minimum of 10 years of progressively responsible experience in higher education reform, policy analysis, or institutional development, particularly in areas related to internationalisation, quality assurance, governance, or financing.

Desirable Expertise

- Proven experience advising governments and/or higher education institutions on higher education, research, and mobility reforms.
- Strong knowledge of EU higher education and research frameworks, including the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), ESG, Erasmus+, and Horizon Europe.
- Familiarity with regional policy processes, including CRM 2.0, SEE2030, and the EU Growth Plan.
- Demonstrated experience in data analysis, stakeholder consultation, and policy drafting.
- Strong analytical and organisational skills, including the ability to support panel preparation, background notes, and technical inputs.

Additional Requirements

- Demonstrated familiarity with the operations of international organisations and public administration in the Western Balkans or similar EU accession contexts.
- Excellent written and verbal communication skills in English; knowledge of one or more regional languages is considered an asset.

IX Quality Control

- The consultant should ensure an internal quality control during the implementing and reporting phase of the assignment. The quality control should ensure that the draft reports and deliverables comply with the above requirements and meet adequate quality standards before sending them to stakeholders for comments. The quality control should ensure consistency and coherence between findings, conclusions and recommendations. It should also ensure that findings reported are duly substantiated and that conclusions are supported by relevant judgment criteria.
- The views expressed in the report will be those of the contractor and will not necessarily reflect those of the Regional Cooperation Council. Therefore, a standard disclaimer reflecting this will be included in the reports. In this regard, the consultant may or may not accept comments and/or proposals for changes received during the above consultation process. However, when comments/proposals for changes are not agreed by the consultant, they should clearly explain the reasons for their final decision in a comments table.

X APPLICATION RULES

The application needs to contain the following:

- Technical Offer;
- Financial Offer.

Technical Offer

- CV of expert, outlining relevant knowledge and experience as described in the Terms of References, along with contact details of referees;
- An outline work programme of a maximum of 5 pages describing the main issues, sources of information to be used, timeline and methodology. The work programme should include the initial outline of the content of the assessment;
- List of references for relevant activities implemented over the past years demonstrating relevant experience in the subject matter;

Financial Offer

The financial offer should reflect the following:

- All figures should be expressed in EUR

NOTE:

When preparing the financial offer, the applicant should take into account the following:

- Use a free format for the Budget providing the Global Price for the work to be provided.
[Maximum budget should not exceed EUR 15,000]
- The fee rates should be broadly consistent with those applicable in the region.

Submission of applications:

Applications need to be submitted by 12 February 2026 through the website link [Apply now](#).

Please make sure that the application is submitted in two separate folders one containing Technical Offer and the other Financial Offer. The documents should be submitted in a form of copies of the originals.

XI EVALUATION RULES:

- The consultancy will be awarded to the highest qualified bidder based on the relevance of skills and expertise to this assignment;

- The applications are evaluated following these criteria:

EVALUATION GRID	Maximum score
A. Technical Offer (A.1+A.2+A.3)	100
A.1. Work experience, references list: Relevant work experience; evidence of other contracts of the size comparable with that of the tender; experience with clients comparable to the Contracting Authority.	35
A.2. Quality and professional capacity of the consultant: CV satisfy the criteria set forth in the Terms of Reference, education and experience demonstrate professional capacity and experience required.	35
A.3 Quality of the concept note: An outline of work programme describing the main issues, information, data sources, research and analytical tools to be employed by the author, as well as the timeline.	30
B. Financial Offer/ lowest price has maximum score	100

Score for offer X =

A: [Total quality score (out of 100) of offer X / 100] * 80

B: [Lowest price / price of offer X] * 20

In addition to the results of the technical and financial evaluation, a competency-based interview will be held with the selected bidder.

Information on selection of the most favourable bidder

The RCC Secretariat shall inform candidates and bidders of decisions reached concerning the award of the contract as soon as possible, including the grounds for any decision not to award a contract for which there has been competitive tendering or to recommence the procedure.

Standard letter of thanks for participation to unsuccessful bidders shall be sent within 15 days after the contract is signed with the awarded bidder.

The candidates and bidders wishing to receive a feedback may send a request within 15 days after receipt of the standard letter of thanks.

The request may be sent to the e-mail address ProcurementforRcc@rcc.int or to the address of the RCC Secretariat:

Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat
Attention to: Administration Department

Building of the Friendship between Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina
Trg Bosne i Hercegovine 1/V
71000 Sarajevo
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Appeals procedure

Bidders believing that they have been harmed by an error or irregularity during the award process may petition the RCC Secretariat directly. The RCC Secretariat must reply within 15 days of receipt of the complaint.

The appeal request may be sent to the e-mail address ProcurementforRcc@rcc.int or to the address of the RCC Secretariat:

Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat
Attention to: Administration Department
Building of the Friendship between Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina
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