DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND CAPACITIES TO SUPPORT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

The Regional Research Promotion Programme is coordinated and operated by the Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe (IICEE) at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). The programme is fully funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Institute for Democracy and Mediation is the Program’s Local Coordination Unit.
DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND CAPACITIES TO SUPPORT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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April 2015
This policy paper is prepared within the National Policy Dialogue in Albania supported by the Regional Research Promotion Programme (RRPP). The content of this policy paper does not represent the official opinion of the Regional Research Promotion Program nor of the Institute for Democracy and mediation. The responsibility for the information and viewpoints expressed in this paper belongs entirely to the authors.
Abstract

The document on the “Reform on Higher Education and Scientific Research” presented for debate by the Albanian Government in 2014, and expected to be adopted in 2015, reveals three strategic objectives for scientific research: i) expansion and enhancement of quality of scientific research and innovation in Albania in conformity with the national priorities on country’s development; ii) integration of the Albanian scientific research in the European Research Area; and, iii) orientation of scientific research towards market needs by strengthening the links of national and international programs with the business. All these objectives converge with the problems confronting scientific research on development of human resources and institutional capacities of universities.

Scientific research in general, and in social sciences in particular, takes up an inconsiderable place in the strategic decision-making of policymakers and other institutional stakeholders and this is reflected in the lack of strategies of higher education institutions, on knowledge and human resources management and development, with regard to basic scientific research. This has led not only to poor infrastructure and tiny budgets for scientific research, but also to limited human capacities and deficient encouragement to engage in scientific research.

The major problems of scientific research, such as the methodological capacities and institutional support, remain still the challenges of the scientific research. This assessment seeks to contribute to the identification of problems regarding human capacities of research in social sciences by presenting some options to strengthen these capacities, relying also on opinions of social science researchers in public and private universities, review of of key documents, laws, strategies, and regulations on the functioning of institutions responsible for scientific research and opinions from a focus group of experts, academics, and key institutional stakeholders.

The University of Tirana was chosen as the main public higher education institution in Albania for scientific research, particularly after the restructuring of the Academy of Science of Albania. Whereas the European University of Tirana was chosen among private higher education institutions, as it has followed a new approach towards the scientific research in the Albanian universities.
# Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ARTI</td>
<td>Agency for Research, Technology and Information</td>
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<td>EHEA</td>
<td>European Higher Education Area</td>
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<td>ERA</td>
<td>European Research Area</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>EUT</td>
<td>European University of Tirana</td>
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<td>GoA</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institutions</td>
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<td>NAFHE</td>
<td>National Agency for Funding Higher Education</td>
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<td>NSDI</td>
<td>National Strategy for Development and Integration</td>
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<td>NSRTDI</td>
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<td>UT</td>
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Introduction

Scientific research in general, and in social sciences in particular, takes up an inconsiderable place in the strategic decision-making of policymakers and other institutional stakeholders and this is reflected in the lack of strategies on higher education institutions (HEI), on knowledge and human resources management and development, with regard to basic scientific research, in order to successfully cope with the challenges of the country’s development and the processes of integration into European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This has led not only to poor infrastructure and tiny budgets for scientific research, but also to limited human capacities and deficient encouragement to engage in scientific research.

The major problems of scientific research, such as the methodological capacities and institutional support, are closely linked with the legal framework on higher education, which is undergoing one of the most radical reforms ever undertaken in the transition period. One of the strategic objectives of this reform is to strengthen the capacities of scientific research, even though it is particularly unclear how it will address the scientific research challenges amid lack of research budget and serious problems with human capacities. This assessment seeks to contribute to the identification of problems regarding human capacities of research in social sciences by presenting some options to strengthen these capacities, relying also on opinions of social science researchers in public and private universities of Albania.
Methodology

The methodology of this assessment is based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. It is structured as follows: i) review of key documents, laws, strategies, and regulations on the functioning of institutions responsible for scientific research, such as the Regulation on the Functioning of University of Tirana (UT) and the Faculty of Social Sciences or the Regulation of the European University of Tirana (EUT); ii) the processing of opinions from a focus group of experts, academics, and key institutional stakeholders; iii) the analysis of the data collected from the survey questionnaires to university instructors of social sciences, economics, history and philology of UT and EUT.

The University of Tirana was chosen as the main public higher education institution in Albania for scientific research, particularly after the restructuring of the Academy of Science of Albania. The European University of Tirana was selected among private higher education institutions, assessed by both national and international institutions. This university has applied a new approach to scientific research in Albanian universities by combining incentives on research with funding through purely research grants by linking the university with the market and its needs for scientific research as well as by making available its research infrastructure for scientific research. The selection of these two universities is undoubtedly not exhaustive. From the representation viewpoint, we can, however, grasp the essence of the problems of scientific research in social sciences in our country.

After the review of the existing literature on scientific research in Albania and Western Balkans and on existing Albanian policies and legislation was complete and in light of priorities enshrined in the Higher Education Reform document¹, a survey was designed to solicit inputs from the community of scientific researchers of

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universities. This emerged from the need to comprehend their perception on scientific research in two levels, individual and institutional, and in two terms, short and medium, in consideration of challenges to make fundamental research in social sciences a driving force to country’s development and part of regional and European networks and projects of scientific research. During January 2015, feedback was obtained from 44 UT pedagogues and 25 EUT teachers holding degrees of Master of Science, Doctor, PhD, Associate Professor, and Professor Doctor. The academic staff in the departments of social sciences, economics and human studies in the University of Tirana is composed of 500 pedagogues, of which about 30% hold Prof. Dr. and Assoc Prof. degrees, about 30% hold doctoral degrees, and 30% have earned a master’s degree. The European University of Tirana has an academic staff of about 120 fulltime instructors.

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2 Allocation of academic staff in the University of Tirana by department is: 70 pedagogues in the Faculty of Social Sciences; 135 pedagogues in the Faculty of Economics, 86 pedagogues in the Faculty of History and Philology, 136 pedagogues in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, and 72 pedagogues in the Faculty of Law. Out of this staff, 82 hold Prof. Dr. degree, 77 Assoc Prof. degree, 172 hold Dr. degree, and 167 hold a Master of Science degree. www.unitir.edu.al
Why development of human resources and institutional capacities is a priority?
The Government of Albania (GoA) has announced three strategic objectives on scientific research in its reform on higher education, presented for discussion in 2014 and expected to be adopted in 2015. These objectives include: i) expansion and enhancement of quality of scientific research and innovation in Albania in conformity with the national priorities on country’s development; ii) integration of the Albanian scientific research in the European Research Area (ERA); and, iii) guiding scientific research to market needs by strengthening the links of national and international programs with the business. These objectives converge with the problems confronting scientific research on development of human resources and institutional capacities of universities. An indispensable condition to enhance quality of scientific research, primarily in social sciences, includes qualification and level of research staff, including both those with scientific degrees and university teachers in the process of completing scientific research.

On the other hand, the reform can and should contribute to the consolidation of a western mindset on scientific research in our country in conformity with the best European and Anglo-Saxon practices of research.

The significance of human resources is clearly stated in the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in Article 109, “Cooperation in Research and Technological Development”, according to which “Development of scientific activity and investments in scientific research support economic development of the country, promote excellence in the country (human capital and exceptional research centers) and influence the transfer of know-how and modern technologies in classroom labs of universities with the aim of applying science to improve quality of life”. The accomplishment of this objective involves the fulfilling of the necessary conditions for participating effectively in the European Research Area. This requires: i) good administrative capacity (adequate staffing and knowledge of

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research cooperation); and, ii) scientific excellence in order to be successful in carrying out research and innovation projects together with scientific partners from EU Member States.\textsuperscript{5}

Yet, support of research institutions and universities for the development and maintenance of scientific research infrastructure is limited to the establishment of some labs, thus reducing the research infrastructure to merely some physical aspects and overlooking other necessary instruments of the scientific research infrastructure. Overall, assessments and indicators on the impact of investments in human resources and infrastructure in scientific research are lacking.\textsuperscript{6}

On the other hand, the development of human resources must be examined within universities and their departments in particular, as the most important actors of scientific research nowadays. Placing university departments to the core of research is a process initiated with the Strategy on Higher Education (2008) and has resumed with the Reform on Higher Education and Scientific Research (2014-2015). The current regulations on the functioning of the universities targeted in this research outline the organizational structure, functions, and competences of the steering bodies and authorities. For example, Article 27 of the Regulation of the University of Tirana stipulates the rights and duties of the academic staff. Yet, the regulation fails to provide for concrete rules on research activity, placing major focus on teaching. The same observation applies to the regulations of other faculties of UT, maintaining the same format. No specific rules on internal operations or research activity exist at department level. These deficiencies weaken the operation of researchers and academics and, coupled with the issues of legislation and funding, diminish their will for scientific research. Irrespective of few similarities, these issues seems to differ when it comes to private institutions of higher education.

The reform on higher education stipulates that a department must be organized by groups of research and teaching in compliance with...
with its scope and mission. The department must manage its fund on scientific research for logistics and individual budget, and should have the discretion in running activities to provide services to third parties in accordance with the established rules. It must use a combination of teaching and scientific research. The reform grants more powers to departments in the process of admission of students, instruction and scientific research. A department promotes programs, coordinates, develops, organizes and manages teaching and scientific research activity. The policies on promoting scientific work at department level have continuity. For instance, direct funding for research at the department level in 2009 sought to encourage the UT academic staff to decide on the research projects they would like to support. The departments, however, failed to manage these funds and ended up with no significant results in boosting their research activities. This example is a testimony of the need for a comprehensive reform to clearly determine at faculty and department level the platforms, regulations, and criteria of promotion of academic staff as well as measurable quality indicators for the scientific research activity.

In addition, the reform has laid bare a serious management problem, not only on human resources and/or infrastructure, but also on scientific research. Indeed, the problematic policymaking of all tiers has contributed to the fragmentation of human resources and augmentation of bureaucratic hindrances leading to waning of incentives for scientific research. Yet, we can safely state that, in addition to the need for high-level scientific researchers, it is indispensable to improve the management of scientific research, which, according to the reform, will be transferred to the departments. In consideration of transferring management functions to another structure, the reform raises some concerns.

As already indicated from the survey data, to academic staff’s viewpoint, the current reform has failed to encompass the entire range of scientific activity. Most academics state that they were not involved in the consultation process of the reform, albeit their urge to be engaged in. All agree that the reform was more than necessary, but declare that it only incorporated few of their interests and demands.
Referring to employment of academic staff, Article 68 of the draft Law on Higher Education states that: “Participation of academic staff in projects, consultancies, publications, and services carried out in the higher education institution is not considered dual employment within the institution”. Yet, these activities have been carried out outside the institution, supported by international projects and donors. Therefore, it is unclear whether these activities will be considered dual employment or not. Research activities are vital to academic careers of university teaching staff and in most cases they are directly linked with the instruction activity. Some 80% of the respondents state that the classes they teach are totally compliant with scientific research education and interests. Those higher education institutions that are unable to provide scientific research cannot hinder personal initiatives of their academic staff to engage in research work of their academic domain. Involvement in research takes up about 30% of their work in the university and a little more for the academic staff with doctoral degrees and longer work experience in universities.

An element expected to strengthen human assets for scientific research in Albania was the Brain Gain Programme. During 2006-2010, the Programme mobilized funds from the Government of Albania and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to attract human capital from abroad by opening up 550 vacancies for scientific workers in universities. However, according to official reports, only 82 workers with Master of Science and doctoral degrees were hired in public and private universities.\(^7\) This casts doubts on the real benefits to be generated from this human capital, which seemed to have been unable to contribute to the increase of research capacities of the universities. Instead, it demotivated them. When referring to the opinions of the academics, collaboration is one of the key items with the highest estimation in enabling and encouraging their involvement in scientific research. Benefits of higher education institutions from gaining Albanian scholars graduated abroad would serve to establish academic cooperation with international peer institutions.

as one of the conditions for involvement in regional and European projects. This also applies to Excellence Fund, established in 2007 and renewed in 2014.8 This program provided scholarship support for doctoral studies to 85 researchers and to 24 students for university studies in the top 15 universities of the world. The application of the only criterion to these researchers/students to return to Albania for a period of few years is, however, insufficient. Indeed, this state investments must become a catalyst for the growth of domestic scientific research and the enhancement of cooperation between Albanian and foreign universities. There are no assessment to indicate the level of return of investment to Albania in enhancing scientific research and vitalization of academic life.

From the viewpoint of strategic decision-making, development of human resources remains a key element that would boost the participation of Albanian scientific researchers in ERA programs (Horizon 2020, Marie Curie, Erasmus for All, etc.). On the other hand, knowledge of and participation in these programs would increase the capacities of the research institutions and their human resources. The data obtained from the survey conducted with university researchers revealed a significant shortage of knowledge and familiarity with these programs. In addition, respondents showed skepticism in getting involved in ERA because of serious deficiencies of cooperation networks, universities’ failures for promotion, lack of capacities and structures engaged in project development and management, lack of knowledge and cooperation among researchers of similar or close research domains in various universities, since academic staff is assessed for instruction only and not at all for scientific research.

Another element that lays bare the poor quality of human resources in scientific research relates to the scientific activity of the academic staff. While international conferences and publication of papers and articles in science reviews is reported as scientific activity, there are no scientific standards or criteria at national scale. The survey also revealed that the evaluation of doctorate thesis does not consider the competencies of scientific

8 Re-promulgated by the Council of Ministers’ Decision no. 483, dated 16/07/2014.
evaluation committees and opponents in the area of scientific research. In addition, the access of researchers and academics in scientific activity is due to their individual endeavors rather than to institutional organization. Cooperation in regional and European projects is basically guided to individuals who take advantage of their personal acquaintances or leading positions in universities, faculties, and departments. The survey revealed scientific researchers’ need for institutional support for the promotion, qualification, participation in research projects, and attendance and representation in scientific conferences. From this viewpoint, scientific research must be considered an integral part of the workload and must be used as an evaluation criterion to designate classes and allocate rewards. The Albanian system is still hostage of a Council of Ministers’ Decision of 1995 that determines the remuneration of councils, committees and expertise of scientific and technological activities\(^9\), even though the system has changed radically in the last 20 years.

The participation of the UT in the Euraxess European Network marks a positive development in this direction. It was finalized on 29 May 2014 upon signing the European Commission Recommendation, dated 11 March 2005, European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. Sufficient and well-developed human resources in research and development (R&D) are the cornerstone of the advancement in scientific knowledge, technological progress, enhancing the quality of life, ensuring the welfare of European citizens and contributing to Europe’s competitiveness. Once adopted, this document is expected to bring in many innovations and help to better integrate into the common European market of researchers and enhance their mobility in EU countries.\(^{10}\) Yet, the UT does not have a platform of concrete commitments in the application of these principles to encourage researchers and to boost participation of women researchers in scientific research. This charter has been adopted by a considerable number of Albanian universities and R&D centers and institutions,

\(^{9}\) Council of Ministers’ Decision no. 567, dated 23/10/1995.  
\(^{10}\) See www.unitir.edu.al/images/Komunikimi/KartaEuropiane_KodiSjelljesRekritimin_KerkuesveShkencore.pdf (19/01/2015).
such as Academy of Science, Agricultural University of Tirana, European University of Tirana, Barleti Institute for Research and Development, Epoka University, Public Health Institute, Polis University, Polytechnic University of Tirana, Agency for Research, Technology and Innovation, and Eqerem Çabej University of Gjirokastra. In this context, it would be advisable to have this charter serve as a cornerstone to the Albanian legislation on promotion of scientific research at national level. However, this document containing obligations for HEIs and employers of researchers is not mentioned in any of the GoA’s relevant documents of the reform on higher education.

All survey respondents admit that the weakest point is the experience and competitiveness of Albanian researchers in the region and Europe with regard to development and involvement in advanced research projects. While it seeks to improve the weak institutional and legislative environment of scientific research that has hampered individual efforts on scientific research, the reform should clearly specify promotional mechanisms in the development of human resources and capacities. In a nutshell, the Draft Law on Higher Education designates two structures responsible for funding scientific research in HEIs: National Agency of Scientific Research (NASR), which replaces the Agency for Research, Technology, and Innovation (ARTI), and the National Agency for Funding Higher Education (NAFHE). While reporting and monitoring of research by EU standards is annual, (article 18) the draft Law on Higher Education stipulates that NASR will monitor scientific research programs every four year.


12 European Commission Recommendation, dated 11.03.2005, On the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, Paragraph 12. “The Member States are invited to inform the Commission, as far as possible, by 15th December 2005 and annually thereafter of any measures they have taken further to this Recommendation, and to inform it of the first results of its application as well as to provide examples of good practice (in the framework of Open Coordination Method). Article 18 of the Draft Law on Higher Education: “Every four year, NARS shall organize the process of appraisal of scientific research activity of higher education institutions and shall rank them on the basis of this appraisal”.
Encouraging academics to scientific research
Chapter 8 of the policy document of the reform on higher education points out: “The higher education must combine teaching and scientific research activities. It is vital that the performance of each and every academic is measured and appraised in these two directions, whereas students must be instructed by academics that have contributed to science and social life. The standard of instruction is improved not only by good instructors, but also by good researchers”.

While the reform identifies some of the factors that have impeded scientific research, its proposals in chapter 8 (8.3, 8.4, 8.5) cannot provide an answer to the concerns and dilemmas expressed by the academic and scientific staff. The survey data reveals a series of obstacles to scientific research in the current system. Among the major demotivational factors for undertaking research are: lack of planning and vision of scientific work in the institutions, insufficient time due to overload of instruction, lack of necessary infrastructure, shortage of funds for scientific research, and lack of cooperation at institutional level. In this aspect, the reform does specify clearly how scientific research will be funded and how proceeds earned by universities/departments from scientific research projects will be managed.

In addition, our research matches the viewpoints of social science researchers in terms of their scientific activity. It turns out that most of them carry out their scientific research outside HEIs, mainly in non-governmental organizations. Universities have generally failed to establish their research foundations or centers. In few cases where they have created research units, the latter have not operated normally with regard to management of research, R&D program, and financial management in particular.

Other problems identified by the scientific researchers include the lack of access to modern literature sources, lack of linkages of scientific research with instructor’s performance evaluation, bureaucratic hardships in obtaining permits for scientific work, deficient access to information on regional or EU research projects, lack of infrastructure and technology required for research, lack of database and difficulty in ensuring data even from public institutions, and lack of institutional cooperation with public and
private institutions to be considered for scientific research on improvement of practices/policies.

According to the perception of scientific researchers, there are several disadvantages in comparison with regional or EU researchers. Apparently, the proposed reform has failed to address these disadvantages adequately, including the lack of methodological capacities of Albanian researchers in social sciences and the lack of structures and skills to conceptualize and manage research projects and instruction overload. The scientific research method, particularly the development of an Anglo-Saxon approach as a conjunction axis of all scientific researches, and training of research staff on writing and implementation of EU projects and programs, such as FP7, Erasmus or Horizon 2020, result to be decisive for the short-term and mid-term future. Researchers point out that benefiting more from these programs requires the establishment and autonomy of research units in departments; determination of the criteria for selecting leaders in universities relative to their participation in international scientific research projects; close cooperation between government institutions and research agencies; cooperation between business entities and research institutions; doctorate program that guarantee an instructional process of phases of research; undertaking research based on modern scientific techniques and methodologies; provision of training on skills of project writing, statistical and empirical analysis; increase of capacities of local experts by providing opportunities to exchange experience in regional or European projects and their recognition in relevant areas; and, enforcement of Charter of Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.

While National Strategy for Research, Technology Development and Innovations (NSRTDI) and ARTI have defined several areas where scientific research will be strategically focused, our survey has disclosed the lack of attention in social sciences, both in terms of priorities and funding. No explicit response in the current reform on higher education has been ensured in this aspect yet. When asked about areas they consider priority for research in social sciences, researchers focus their attention in the analysis and evaluation of public policies, rule of law, social state, sustainable development, challenges of European integration, and social psychology.
Addressing priorities of scientific research in social sciences
Based on the above analysis, one can easily identify the universities’ inadequacy to meet the national objectives to increase quality and enhance scientific research, particularly to involve Albanian researchers in the regional and European research area. Changes call for improvement to the legislation and institutional framework and the establishment of national standards where scientific research will be based upon. Some proposals on the strengthening institutional capacities and development of human resources regarding fundamental research in social sciences include:

1. Strengthening institutional capacities

a. From the strategic viewpoint

- Development of strategies on management of scientific knowledge at national level (ARTI) as well as at university and department level;

- Enhancement of Albania’s presence in international research structure, institutions and forums by placing concerted attention to government stakeholders, line ministries, and universities;

- ARTI, as partially foreseen in its new guideline, and the Academy of Science may develop programs to support and network young scientists that can become part of regional and European networks;

- In cooperation with public and private universities, ARTI may undertake an initiative to design a group of subjects or a series of training lectures on “fundraising for research”,
“writing and implementation of projects”, and “project management”, which can technically serve researchers, especially in the framework of application for large-scale research projects to EU, such as Horizon 2020;

• Universities and research institutions must also identify the private sector as key partner and end user for many of their research products. This kind of orientation, clearly stipulated as one of the strategic goals of the reform on higher education, is the linking bridge between university and society;

• Agreements and dialog among universities, particularly social sciences faculties, and public and private institutions would increase awareness and trust of the latter in the importance of research in social sciences and products of these studies;

• HEIs’ periodic reporting on implementation of the Charter of Researchers and enforcement of Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Research must become part of the strategic goals of the universities and departments as basic units or scientific research.

b. From the structural viewpoint

• Universities need to establish their own structures for fundraising for scientific research from sources outside the university. This may help to encourage pedagogues to empower research within universities;

• Research in social sciences in public universities is predominantly run on individual initiatives rather than institutional encouragement. A structural effort is observed in the EUT (with the establishment of the labor boards at the departments with the participation of various actors from the business and other institutions) even though their impact has never been evaluated;
• Installation of labs and introduction of new research technologies;

• Access to online libraries and subscription to science reviews;

• Enrich faculty libraries with modern science literature on annual basis;

• Scientific publication by European standards depicting original Albanian research and comparative studies;

• Scientific conferences and roundtables of Albanian and regional research by European standards.

c. **From the financial viewpoint**

• Financial arrangements, by means of legislative improvements for supporting scientific research and by introducing various forms of remuneration linked to scientific research;

• ARTI needs to become a semi-budgetary institution in order to avoid bureaucracies and to help attract funding from various sources, not only from the state but also from national and international entities;

• Detailed itemization of funds for scientific research in the HEI budget, up to a department level;

• Increase the share of revenues of HEI budget from scientific research;

• Another aspect that the Draft Law on Higher Education does not adequately clarify how the private sector can co-fund the scientific research. This means that research strategies of universities and their departments create the appropriate space for business community to articulate its interests.
2. Development of human resources

a. From the quality viewpoint

- Approve research platforms at department level and establish criteria for appraising research work;

- Determine the performance indicators of pedagogues linked with scientific work to be reflected in his/her remuneration;

- Ensure administrative and procedural facilities on researchers’ mobility;

- Scientific research needs to be determined as criterion of recruitment and assignment of teaching subjects at the university, along with the evaluation of academic staff on the basis of research work;

- Open up to new learning programs based on scientific experience of instructors;

- Promotion in academic careers and to leading positions should consider not only the scientific degrees and titles but also the contribution as a scientific researcher;

- Increase the number of technical consultations provided by the university to interested public and private entities.

b. From the quantity viewpoint

- Increase participation in regional and EU research programs by organizing not only informational sessions but also training workshops;
• Increase the number of researchers’ groups and networks through institutional agreements;

• Increase the number of trained researchers and trainings/workshops delivered on modern research methods and techniques and approach of research-based teaching.
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The Regional Research Programme is coordinated and operated by the Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe (IICEE) at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). The programme is fully funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Institute for Democracy and Mediation is the Program's Local Coordination Unit.