CREST Peer Learning Activities on Universities:

STRATEGIC PLAN

The aim of this strategic plan is to provide detailed guidance to the participants of the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) by outlining the aim of the exercise, the process by which it will proceed and underline the respective contribution of each peer learner.

Background context

The final report of the CREST Working Group on excellence of research in universities was adopted by CREST on 3 April 2009. The study offered analysis tools, good practices, comparisons of certain instruments used at the national level, and inventories of new developments and existing policies and instruments. Most importantly, the Working Group's aim was to pull together information about new European policy initiatives and specific tools to promote research excellence by giving an overview of the instruments forming national policies, an effort which had not been previously accomplished. A natural outcome of discussions leading to this first approach to "map the field" was the comparison between national policies and instruments used.

The existing instruments were clustered into three "strategy types":

- A) *Capacity building*, focusing on the setting-up, updating and development of infrastructures, young researchers and researcher careers

- B) *Competitive research* stimulated by a framework of autonomy and competition in a bottom-up approach**,** based on incentives, quality management systems, evaluation and peer review

- C) *Prioritization* of research groups and fields, promoting the setting-up of elite segments to achieve world-class excellence through policies ensuring the promotion of excellent research groups and the stimulation of network structures.

The typology derived from existing practices was meant to offer some guidelines to help MS orientate their specific strategies towards optimal measures for increased excellence in research.

In addition to this typology, the major findings from this collaboration included a set of nine core recommendations, one of which expressed the conviction that the exercise should not end with the Working Group's report and that there was a need to go further in-depth with national experiences to allow for more comparisons and a deeper exchange of practices. A

collection of good practices was identified as a possible starting point for this endeavour. Furthermore, it was advised that instruments which were successfully implemented in only a few MS should be the focus for further mutual learning.

An informal peer learning effect resulted through participant discussions during the six meetings in Brussels at the European Commission. Participants expressed this informal peer learning as a valuable aspect of the Working Group meetings and also expressed an interest in a more organized forum in which to further enhance mutual learning.

As indicated in Annex VI of the Terms of Reference for CREST Peer Learning Activities for Universities, a follow up meeting in Prague on 11-12 June 2009 resulted in a decision to pursue Peer Learning Activities (PLA) as a next step to further develop findings from the CREST Working Group on excellence of research in universities. An active participant of the Working Group, Denmark agreed to spearhead activities for the PLA. CREST adopted the mandate for 'Peer Learning activities on Universities' on 28 September 2009. For the first time in the history of CREST, the PLA method will be applied.

Objectives

According to the mandate, there are two main objectives of the CREST PLA:

1. To strengthen mutual learning and deepen the exchange of good practice between countries sharing similar policy concerns, with the aim to enhance quality research in MS countries. Five themes are presented on which peer learning countries will focus.

2. To evaluate the PLA as a process and provide an assessment of the appropriateness of PLA as a methodological tool for the CREST learning processes and further policy making.

Plan of Action

To facilitate and encourage the transmission of knowledge between peer countries and other interested parties, the CREST PLA will produce the following specified **documents** and will ensure the following peer learning forums:

- Preparatory form to gather information from peer learning countries (for each PLA) and survey on the outcomes of the forms
- Agendas for five at least 2-day PLAs (interactive thematic seminars)
- Summary report from each of the five PLAs (incl. results of thematic discussions and presentations of case studies and practices)
- Mid-term report (incl. the results from at least two PLAs) and presentation to CREST

- Final report including methodological assessment of PLA

The **coordination meetings** will be attended by the lead country, the consultant coordinator and the Commission. They are intended to conceptualize the basic strategic plan and to ensure the progress in the project.

The **planning meetings** will be attended by the respective host country, the lead country, the consultant coordinator, a consultant and the Commission. They are used for the specific preparation of a PLA.

The **planning papers** will specify the importance, the European context and the relevant discussions, challenges and trends of each PLA topic. They include the agenda for the PLA.

The **PLAs** are based on the peer learning method of mutual exchange and knowledge building. This method is voluntary, though a number of criteria help to foster best results, including active and equal participation, focused discussions, a small group size, and a group with some similar characteristics.

The **summary reports** are intended to be smaller publications based on case studies and experiences from the participating countries, as well as outcomes of thematic discussions and conclusions of the PLA.

The **mid-term report** will present a state of play of the PLA exercise.

The **final report** will provide a summary of the conclusions from the PLA and include an assessment of PLA as a methodological tool for CREST. The aim is to assess the benefit and appropriateness of the PLA working method for further concretely implementing the modernisation of Universities and fostering their research capacity.

If we combine these events and reports we will come to the following process:

- The first coordination meeting already took place in January and lead to the final version of this strategic paper.

- For each PLA the consultants will collect information, the host country will produce the planning paper (supported by consultants and Denmark) and a planning meeting will take place. After each PLA a summary report will be written.

- The results of the first two PLA will be used for the mid-term report.

- The result of all PLAs and the assessment of the PLA method will lead to the final report. Before the final report is written another coordination meeting will be held, focusing on the methodological experience.

Working Method and Design of the PLA

Preparation of PLAs

Hosting countries are responsible for the conceptual design of their PLA. They prepare a planning paper to be discussed in a planning meeting with the Leading country, the consultants and the EC. This paper consists of 2-3 pages describing the importance of the topic, the European context and an overview on important discussion, challenges and trends (the example for the first PLA in Denmark could be found in the annex). The planning paper should also contain the agenda. The planning paper will be developed in the following way:

- One of the consultants interviews the responsible persons of the host country by telephone. On the basis of the interview the consultant will make a protocol as input for the planning paper. EC, lead country and consultants will comment on this.
- Based on this input the host country will make a planning paper draft.
- Leading country, EC and consultants will give feedback.
- On the planning meeting the planning paper will be finalized.

The second aspect of preparation is the collection of information from the participants by the consultants. The specific needs for a pre-collection of information have to be discussed for each PLA.

Definition of PLA

The Peer Learning Activities are organized in the form of interactive thematic seminars. For the purposes of this document and the seminars, the definition of peer learning is based on the mandate's statement that "peer learning is a voluntary process of cooperation at the European level whereby policy makers and practitioners from MS learn through direct contact and practical cooperation from MS' experiences in areas of shared interest and concern." An orientation could be in some respect the format developed by DG EAC in the OMC clusters on Higher Education, which does not entail any specific working method but which was a direct inspiration for the PLA on research activities of Universities. CREST is using this opportunity to employ PLA as an instrument for mutual exchange for the first time. These seminars involve hosting countries organizing the PLA plus up to 10 participating countries including governmental and university representatives.

Characteristics of PLAs

For each PLA, at least two days are planned per topic. In at least one PLA a 3-day-format should be used in order to analyze the effect of different timeframes for the success of peer learning. In the case of two days, the first day could be devoted to the building up of knowledge and ideas through presentations and plenary discussions, for which host countries prepare and have key responsibilities. The host country should identify the challenges to be addressed and design the agenda by stressing key issues along which national case studies will be selected and on which discussions will be focused. The second day could be focused on topical workshops. The workshops may take a form as desired by the host country and according to the needs dictated by the topic discussions. For example,

the first PLA format will entail a discussion of the starting situation, the reform process, and the "end" situation or outcomes of the reform. Regardless of the workshop format, it is important that opportunities and constraints for policy implementation are addressed.

Diverse didactic methods, such as working groups and gallery walks, will be employed to foster peer learning. In general, discussions should take place on a practical level to encourage the exchange of good practices that do not merely gather information, but can bring about concrete policy changes. At the same time, consideration of the context of each policy measure should not be overlooked. Discussions on the context of the reform should address the following questions: What are the challenges and opportunities that the reform is aiming to address? Why do these call for the specific measures planned or implemented? What is the international and national policy making context in which the reform should be understood? Discussions should always include reflection on how quality research can be enhanced. However, these should also be complemented by reflection on the broader knowledge triangle and the larger societal context. Moderation of the workshops should be shared between host country and the external consultants, with the host country moderating the presentation phase (day 1) and the consultants moderating the workshop phase (day 2). Especially the thematic workshops should be moderated externally. In addition, the consultants will also act as Rapporteurs for the seminars.

PLA participants

The representatives involved in the PLA include governmental level representatives of the lead country (Denmark), governmental and institutional level representatives from host countries and peer learning countries, the European Commission and three external experts. It should be kept in mind that it is not recommended that non-peer status groups attend the workshop section of the seminars in order to maintain the utmost trust between peer learners and to ensure open and honest exchanges. However, their presence during the presentation section of the seminars may be relevant and appropriate, depending on the interests of the host country and peer learners. Especially the workshop phase (day 2) should include only the peer learners, during the presentations on day 1 additional people interested and competent in the topic could take part.

Tasks of the different actors

A summarizing description of the actors' tasks are as follows:

Lead Country

Denmark is the lead country for this PLA. Its main duties include:

- Spearheading the overall management and organization of the PLAs in coordination with the host countries.
- Chairing all meetings with the support of the Commission.
- Approving the summary reports in coordination with the host countries.
- Ensuring feedback to CREST.

Host Countries

For each seminar, a country takes responsibility for the logistical planning and organization of the event. In order to best coordinate the seminars, planning meetings are organized preceding the event along with the lead country, the Commission and the Consultant Coordinator. In addition, host countries are also expected to:

- Prepare the content for their respective PLA in close cooperation with the Commission and external consultants and provide background information to share with the peer learning countries.
- Facilitate and encourage open mutual learning and the setting up of national policy presentations to invite fair and well-argued critique and identification of both successes and failures.
- Provide feedback for the reports and on the methodology of peer learning.

The 5 PLAs will be hosted by the following countries:

Topic	Host Country	Tentative schedule
Reform of institutional structure	Denmark	February 8-10
World Class Excellence	Portugal	May 3-5 [TBC]
Capacity building	Estonia	May 17-19
Young researchers – recruitment and career	Ireland	June 8-11
Overhead and costing of research projects	Spain	September 6-8 [TBC]

Peer Learning Countries

For each seminar, up to 10 peer learning countries will be involved. For each country, up to two experts will participate (one on the policy development/governmental level and one on the operational/institutional level, affected by governmental policies). As specified by the mandate, these representatives should have "responsibilities and competences related to the specific topic of the PLA." The tasks of the peer learners include:

- Filling out of forms sent and answering information requests in advance to facilitate seminar discussions
- Active participation in the seminar discussions
- If requested, support in planning the topic discussions with the host country in order to ensure different experiences are taken into account.
- Preparation of a presentation on national policy development and implementation on the selected topic

6

- Feedback on report drafts
- Feedback on the methodology of peer learning

consultants

The tasks of the consultants include:

- Facilitating the meetings and structuring discussion; Attendance of the Consultant Coordinator at the coordination meetings.
- Drafting of the seminar minutes, strategic plan, summary reports, mid-term and final reports (including an assessment on the PLA as a methodological tool).
- Support to the host country in preparing the PLA planning paper.
- Preparation of background documents and data for participants' discussions, in close coordination with the host country and Commission.
- Support to the Leading country and to the European Commission for the coordination of the PLA process.

European Commission

The role of the European Commission includes:

- Provision of financial support
- Liaising with the external experts and lead country to ensure smooth running of the group
- Attendance at seminars and meetings to provide information and advice
- Support for the PLA activities and the work of consultants, including providing relevant documents and data as well as editorial input for the production of the reports.

Peer Learning Process

According to the CREST PLA mandate, the PLA shall include the following basic elements:

- Presentation by the leading country of the topic in the general context of the series of PLA.
- Presentation by the host country of opportunities and constraints for policy development and implementation.
- Initial reactions of the "peer learning" countries.
- Site visit (if appropriate).
- Topical discussions on key issues, as identified from the initial reactions of the "peer learning" countries.
- Short presentations by "peer learning" countries on policy approaches.

- Identification of key messages, conclusions and questions from the PLA, possible follow-up activities and opportunities for dissemination.

This offers a good basic outline for the workshops, but it has to be embedded in some further methodology of peer learning. We suggest the following general elements to be included as part of the peer learning process.

(1) Respect basic principles of peer learning:

- The group structure/composition should be well designed. Especially a certain degree of homogeneityof the group is desirable: If people are not from the same hierarchical positions and at the same timehave different levels of knowledge and experiences in the domain the group process might not work. However, special forms of heterogeneity, e.g. complementary experiences of peers, could be helpful. A good composition would consist of ministry and university representatives with expertise and experience in the topic of the PLA.
- The group size should not be too large, for interactive sessions around 20-30.
- Participation should be voluntary so that participants are interested in the topics and engaged in the exchange.
- Results from the discussions should be mutually beneficial to all peer learners, i.e. all participants could have learning effects instead of an asymmetric situation where some purely act as teachers, others as learners.
- Information provision should be symmetric. A participant could only expect to get an information from the others if he/she is willing to give the same information to the others.
- It should be clear that the peer learners act as individual experts, they do not have to represent the "official opinion" of their institutions.
- Each participant decides for him or herself how the peer learning results are used in their national contexts, though for the purposes of CREST and to create more learning effects for broader group, the outcomes of the learning process will be published.
- Nonetheless, prior to the publication of sensitive information, peer learners will be consulted. Each participating country could give a feedback on the reports.
- A climate for trust should be created by explicitly setting "rules of the game" before the PLA starts. The basic principles mentioned here should be the basis for these rules.

(2) Support the preconditions necessary which help ensure success of peer learning:

- Peer learners should be encouraged to communicate their own interests, respond to other group members, take responsibility for group success and constructively deal with conflicts within the group.
- The tasks and learning targets of the group should be clearly defined, understood and as fully planned in advance as possible by all peer learners in order to promote productivity and teamwork.
- To motivate participants, peer learners should be aware of the benefits of the peer learning process and how these benefits can best be attained through active participation.

(3) Prepare peer learning workshops. Some information should be gathered before the meeting to enable an efficient way of working when peer learners meet. Two days is a short timeframe and there should be enough leeway for problem-focused discussions. The information collection should focus on the following aspects:

- The pre-identification of "hot issues" in the peer learning countries (as a starting point for identifying topics to be more deeply discussed).
- A general overview (induced by a structured form) of what is the current situation and recent history in the country on the respective topic. When relevant, types or clusters of measures from this collection may form the basis for the PLA discussions.

(4) Create clear blocks with different functions within the PLA. In general, following the mandate three blocks seem to be adequate:

- Presentations of the host country as basic input.
- Structured presentation of country situations.
- Topic-centred moderated discussions and workshops, focused on good practices and/or common challenges and solutions.

(5) Ensure comparability of participants' presentation by giving some guidelines for their good practice presentation. If a reform has been completed or is in a sufficiently advanced stage to be evaluated, each presentation should contain:

- Background context,
- Type of reform activity,
- Reasons/objectives for reform activity,
- Process, specific measures,
- Challenges and possible solutions,
- Description of outcomes,
- Strengths and weaknesses, major lessons learnt.

However, some participating countries may also not have realized a reform; they may be in a planning phase or at a phase where they are faced with challenges that call for reform. In these cases, the format of presentations should be adapted to highlight the background context, intended steps, and possible challenges. An alternative format could contain the following:

- Background context,
- Intended type of reform activity (including plans or ideas),
- Reasons/rationale for reform activity,
- Expected actor and stakeholder roles,
- Targets/Desired outcomes,
- Challenges/Issues and possible solutions, if any.

(6) Use activating moderation techniques during the PLA, e.g., possibilities are:

- Introduce a structured format for giving feedback to case presentations;
- "peer consulting" on specific problems, on a specific case given by one participant;
- Activating formats like "gallery walks", working groups, etc.;
- Clear tasks for working groups ("find the 10 golden rules for….").

(7) Document the results of the PLA.

Aside from these general guidelines, special methods could be tested linked with the different topics of the PLA. We should be flexible throughout the peer learning process to adjust the methodology to the experiences made.

Evaluation of PLAs

As stipulated by the CREST mandate, the PLA as a process will be evaluated upon conclusion of the exercise. Based on the input of the participants, the consultants will provide an assessment of the appropriateness of PLA as a methodological tool for the CREST learning processes and further policy making, in collaboration with the leading country, the host countries and the Commission.

Aspects of the evaluation should be:

- Are there mutual learning effects beneficial for the member state? Is the beneficial transfer to the workplace of the participant possible?

- Are there positive individual outcomes for the participants?

- How is the quality of the peer learning process assessed?

The first two evaluation criteria should be covered by telephone interviews with selected participants some weeks after the PLA. The last criteria could be assessed by questionnaires distributed to the participants at the end of the PLA.

PLAs topics and the European context

As previously mentioned, each PLA should follow a clear programme and should try to discuss the most urgent issues connected with the topic from the perspective of the peer learners. To achieve this, the aspects of the topic should be identified with the planning paper. An example for a planning paper for the PLA on "reform of institutional structure" is shown in the annex; similar papers have to follow for each PLA. The method of peer learning includes the idea that the peer learners have the last word on the topics of peer learning. Therefore, the PLA has to be open for spontaneous variations of the planning during the PLA.

The five PLA topics have been chosen because of their relevance in the European context. The European context of the five topics is as follows:

- **Reform of institutional structure**: Based on the vision of the European Research Area and the Lisbon strategy revision, it is clear that Europe needs to contribute to the global production of knowledge by increasing research output and ensuring the highest of quality for this research. Universities and research agencies play integrate roles in this endeavour. In many countries, the competitiveness of the higher education and research sectors is questioned because of the structure; in some cases a lack of an elite sector is discussed, institutions are regarded as too numerous or too small, research agendas are seen as not sufficiently focused. Research culture in the ERA changes towards cooperative network structures, mergers and research clusters create new research units. Fragmented structures in some disciplines might endanger critical masses of academic knowledge, especially in the situation of budget cutbacks as the result of economic crisis

- **World class excellence:** The capability of European Universities to increase their research performance is crucial for the attractiveness and the competitiveness of European Research on an international scale. Despite the good average performance of University-based research across Europe, actions are needed to further strengthen a segment of World-Class Universities as well as to incentivize and take full advantage of the potential of more focused or specialized- but still quality based- institutional profiles. Achieving world class excellence implies policy choices supported by steering tools and incentives. Among different national instruments or policies, the design of the recent German Initiative of Excellence is currently inspiring different national authorities.

- **Capacity building**: Europe is not making the most of its research potential and resources located in less advanced regions remote from the European core of research and industrial development. Indeed, the Convergence and Outermost regions research actors may find difficult to play their role and find their place in the ERA, because they are facing problems of brain drain, infrastructure, economic and institutional organisation or lack of appropriate access to finance. Dedicated actions must be taken to reinforce their excellence and creativity while taking advantage of the knowledge and knowhow existing in leading research organisations of Europe. The objective of the European Union is to actively make that these actors become dynamic ones of the European Research Area (ERA) within the enlarged Union. This entails a variety of challenges such as 'brain gain' through networking with other European world class research players and industry, upgrading of relevant RTD infrastructure, recruitment of experienced researchers and institutional mobilization as well as dynamic contribution to the regional or European sustainable socio-economic development.

- **Young researchers – recruitment and career:** The importance of researchers for socio-economic progress in Europe has been acknowledged for a long time now. The European Union has been driving the process towards recognition of research as a profession through various initiatives, including the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for their Recruitment[1]. The European Partnership for Researchers[2] calls for concerted action at national level in order to make the research profession more attractive and sustainable. A lot remains to be done, especially for early career researchers, at the level of HEIs. This includes issues related to open recruitment and transparent appraisal and promotion procedures, attractive employment and working conditions, career development support (also with regard to all types of mobility), work-life balance, participation in institutional governance, training relevant to careers both within and outside of academia, implementation of flexicurity principles etc.

- **Overhead and costing of research projects**: External project-based funding is an increasing source of financing research and has become a key component of the funding mix for University based research. All over Europe funding streams for university-based research are becoming more diverse, with a relatively lower share of core funding and by tendency a higher share of external, competitive funding. Funding conditions have a major impact on the capability of research institutions to

---

[1] See http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/rights
[2] Commission Communication: Better careers and more mobility: a European partnership for researchers – COM (2008) 317, http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/specific-era-initiatives_en.html

achieve their goals and ensure the long term competitiveness of their research portfolios in a sustainable way.

As a direct consequence, research institutions have to set up strategies and mechanisms to benefit from competitive funding and to handle with the requirements of external funders. This implies the development of sound financial and accounting management practices and of a greater strategic decision-making capacity in Universities, based on a capability to identify the true costs of their activities. However, to support their research portfolios, research institutions must be in a position to manage a huge diversity of external funding terms and conditions in order to access to funds..

The financial modernization of Universities remains slow, due to internal institutional resistances but also to the complexity of external funding terms and conditions. Significant progresses are expected on both sides for the sake of the European Research Area.

ANNEX: PLANNING PAPER ON PLA "Reform of institutional structure"

The PLA on the reform of institutional structure will include mergers between HEIs and between HEIs and public research organizations, as well as other restructuring approaches such as cooperation, strategic alliances or other measures to optimize the institutional structure of the HE system.[3]

Importance

Across the globe, there is increasing competition to ensure that higher education institutions contribute as active players in the knowledge society. Budget cuts and the importance of attracting high quality students and researchers to a country's HEIs has led policy makers to restructure existing higher education and research institutions so that they may concentrate research excellence and promote a competitive higher education sector.

European context

Based on the vision of the European Research Area and the Lisbon strategy revision, it is clear that Europe needs to contribute to the global production of knowledge by increasing research output and ensuring the highest of quality for this research. Universities and research agencies play integrate roles in this endeavour. In many countries, the competitiveness of the higher education and research sectors is questioned because of the structure; in some cases a lack of an elite sector is discussed, institutions are regarded as too numerous or too small, research agendas are seen as not sufficiently focused. Research culture in the ERA changes towards cooperative network structures, mergers and research clusters create new research units. Fragmented structures in some disciplines might endanger critical masses of academic knowledge, especially in the situation of budget cutbacks as the result of economic crisis.

Important discussions, challenges and trends

Challenges may include resistance of stakeholders to restructuring or budget constraints. A consideration of the value-added of certain restructuring approaches over others could be taken into account as well as a comparison of the respective benefits of these different types of policy responses. Attention should be paid that the discussions focus on measures in regards to research quality. In addition, discussions should reflect upon the following ideas, which can be modified based on whether an activity has been completed, is in process, or is simply in the proposal stage:

a. Types/forms of mergers and other structural policy measures

---

[3] Internal restructuring at the faculty or institutional level is *not* a part of the discussion for this PLA.

i. Mergers of public research organizations and universities
        - Synergies between higher education and public research
        - Internationalization of public research
        - Quality and independence of research based public sector consulting
    ii. The comprehensive university model: Mergers of Higher Education Institutions
        - Why multi-faculty institutions?
        - What is critical mass?
        - National consolidation and internationalization
    iii. Other policy measures to institutional restructuring
        - Portfolio of instruments
        - (dis-)advantages of different approaches
    iv. Developmental trends the measures address
        - Global context and trends
        - European context and trends: Diversification and consolidation

b. Rationales for mergers and other structural policy measures
    - Differential advantage of mergers compared with cooperation or other structural measures
    - Assumptions about relationship merger – research quality, importance of research quality aspect
    - The expectations from mergers (by different stakeholders): critical mass, internationalization, synergies, etc.
    - The ideal structure of higher education sectors

c. The role of different actors, strategic issues
    - Role of the state, form of intervention – did the state organize the mergers or did HEIs choose their own partners? Top-down vs. bottom-up developments.
    - Role of institutions
    - Setting strategies for institutional restructuring, choice of partners

d. Process, management issues
    - Designing favourable framework conditions for mergers and other restructuring approaches
    - Major tasks for implementation
    - Effects on institutional management
    - Challenges

e. Results, outcomes of mergers and other institutional restructuring approaches
    - How is research quality influenced? Do assumptions hold?
    - Major success factors?
    - Problems, Lessons learnt?

Diane Carr

Prof. Dr. Frank Ziegele

January 26th, 2010