



THE FIRST YEARS OF WBAA

- REPORT -



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1. Executive Summary

The report 'The first years of WBAA' aims to introduce the Western Balkans Alumni Association and to give an overview of the first four years of the network of volunteers. It provides information on the objectives, structure, and activities since March 2018, including the WBAA Projects, WBAA Teams and Tracer Study. This report should show how WBAA contributes to the regional exchange of EU alumni, the promotion of mobility programmes, the modernisation of higher education and the academic and professional development of young people in the region.

2. About WBAA

The Western Balkans Alumni Association (hereinafter WBAA) is a regional association of students and alumni from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo¹ and Serbia who have spent part of their studies in the EU member states or third countries associated with the Erasmus+ Programme, either as an EU scholar or EU country scholar, or as a self-funded individual.

WBAA emerged from the 4th Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training held in Vlore, Albania in 2015, where the Ministers of Education of the six Western Balkan economies (hereinafter WB) agreed on the need to establish a regional network of students and alumni. After this event, different stakeholders around the Western Balkans supported by the European Commission and European counterparts, started conceptualising WBAA. This was followed by a conference called “Balkan Connexion: Dialogue on a Western Balkan Regional Alumni Association (WB RAA)” in Podgorica, Montenegro on 3-4 November 2016, organised by the European Commission, that gathered representatives of the related community (Erasmus+ alumni, students, teachers, academic staff, representatives of youth organisations and National Erasmus+ Offices from the WB) and in which the ‘WESTERN BALKAN REGIONAL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION’ was proposed as a regional EC-supported project. Fun fact: The very first name for WBAA was not WBAA at all! The idea for the organisation was to be called Western Balkans Regional Alumni Association (WBRAA) but this name was changed shortly before the official launch of what is today known as WBAA.

After the official launch in March 2018 on a confluence meeting in Ohrid, North Macedonia, WBAA’s 1st General Assembly took place in March 2019 in Tirana, Albania. With the outbreak of the Corona pandemic in Europe in March 2020, many WBAA activities had to be suspended for the time being, which was a challenge for a volunteer network. After many

¹ 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

virtual meetings and activities, onsite events could finally take place again in the summer of 2021.

From the beginning, WBAA has supported its members in carrying out WBAA Projects on a voluntary basis. The project-related costs are fully covered within the framework of an application procedure stipulated by the EU. Today, the association brings together almost 1000 students and alumni (incl. academic and university staff) from WB as well as other relevant actors from the region (including public, private, and civic sectors) to make sure that the young people's voices in the region are heard loud and clear and their messages are being communicated to relevant higher education actors. During various events organised by WBAA members for its own members on a regular basis, experts from different departments, professional fields and regions are invited to provide important information about Higher Education (HE), learning mobility programmes, professional training, organisational structures etc.

Since its inception in March 2018, WBAA has come a long way! The purpose of this publication is to present the development and achievements of WBAA's first four years up to March 2022.

3. Objectives

3.1 WBAA's Objectives

- Establishing*** a strong union of alumni from the Western Balkans
- Promoting*** mobility opportunities in Europe and beyond
- Sharing*** experience by supporting and mentoring students
- Increasing*** employability through exchange of best practice, experience, and contacts
- Empowering*** and inspiring young people to achieve their goals
- Contributing*** to the modernisation of higher education systems back home
- Liaising*** with other alumni associations in the EU and beyond

3.2 Aims and Goals of WBAA

The aim of WBAA is to strengthen a union of alumni coming from WB in order to advocate for modernisation, improve the quality of higher education in the region and empower young people of WB on their academic and career development towards successful employment.

3.3 More specifically WBAA aims to:

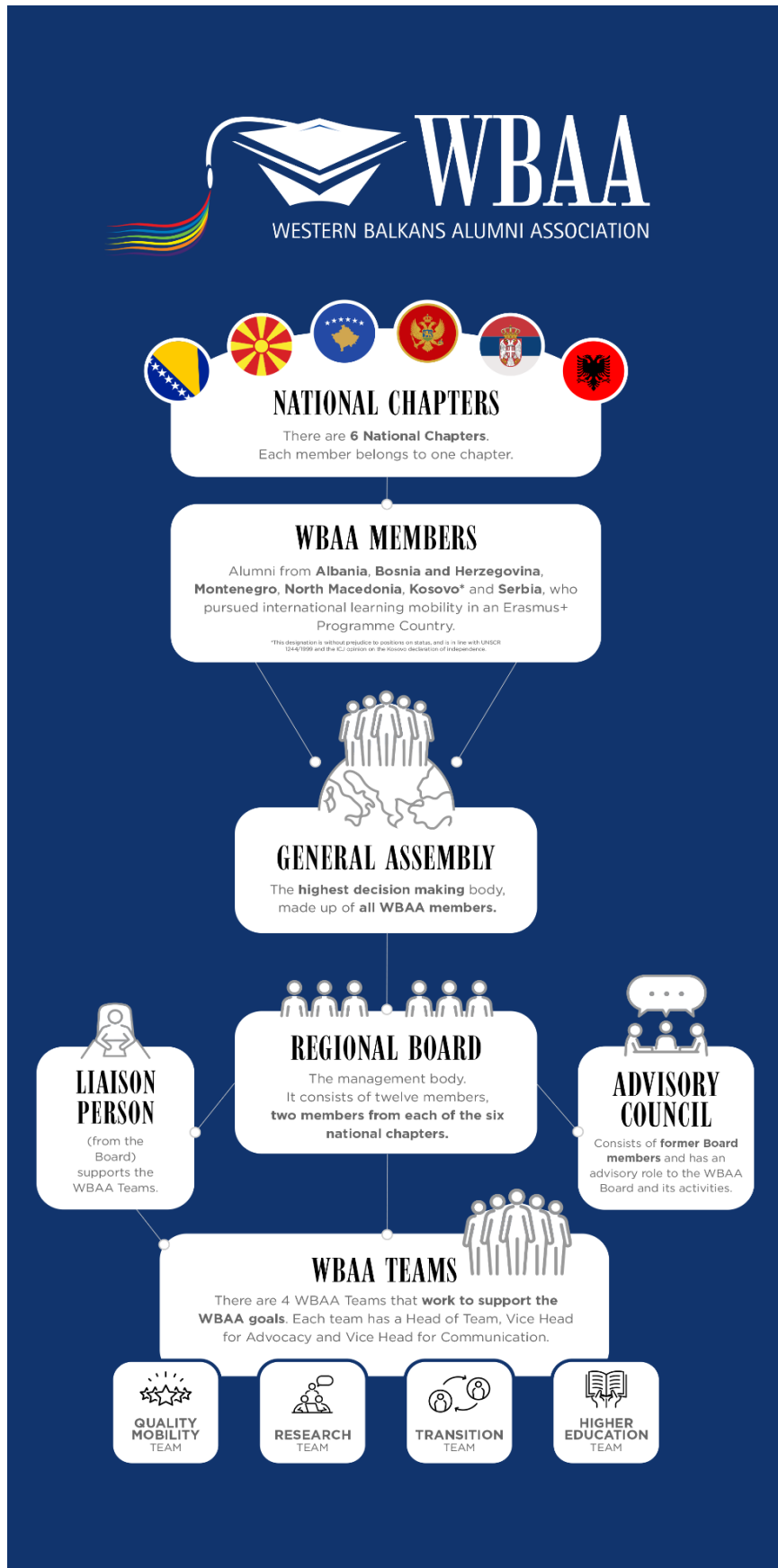
1. Unify students and alumni (incl. academic staff) within Chapters and across WB
2. Exchange and share knowledge, experiences and contacts within a multicultural and international association

3. Enhance communication and cooperation with decision makers, representatives of higher education institutions (HEIs), governments, as well as with other institutions and organisations
4. Help the modernisation efforts of WB Higher Education (HE) systems
5. Strengthen the links between HE & the labour market to ease school-to-work transition and increase employability
6. Foster student mobility in WB and empower students to engage in mobility programmes (including comfortable transition prior to and after the mobility period through different online and offline activities)
7. Promote HE and the importance of intercultural dialogue, learning and mobility experiences.

These objectives should be achieved by (inter alia and not exhaustive)

- Deepening regional exchange and collaboration in the field of HE and beyond, by increasing the contacts between participants from EU funded projects and other European alumni associations, WBAA alumni and local communities
- Promoting and facilitating mutual mobility flows: between WB and EU as well as within WB
- Involving and motivating young people into programmes, projects, workshops, panel discussions and other activities focused on raising awareness of the Western Balkans students' needs
- Building up the membership of the WBAA and expanding with new individuals and partners
- Advocating and promoting policy actions and activities that improve the quality of higher education and research capacities in WB
- Assisting economy-level modernisation efforts in the area of HE
- Supporting new research initiatives and evidence-gathering of HE reforms
- Cooperating with all relevant institutions (regional, but also international, national and local) in achieving the goals of development and modernisation of HE in the WB by following the most successful European practices regarding HE
- Supporting networking and cooperation between universities in WB and EU as well as academic cooperation within WB
- Advocating for changes to regulations, actions and/or activities which could improve the situation of students from the region

4. Organigram



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SISTER ORGANISATIONS:



ERASMUS+ STUDENT AND ALUMNI ALLIANCE



Erasmus Mundus Association



OCEANS Network



Erasmus Student Network



garag=ERASMUS Foundation



AFRICAN STUDENTS & ALUMNI FORUM
Forum on Education & Skills for African Students

SERVICE PROVIDER:



MOZAIC
Innovative and Creative



giz
Technische Dienstleistung für die weltweite Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



PPWA



Institut für Policy Studies
Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna

For operational and administrative support.

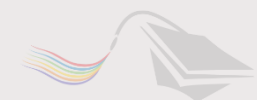


Fig 1 WBAA Organigram

WBAA MEMBERS are students and alumni of the Western Balkan region, namely the following chapters (alphabetically): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The GENERAL ASSEMBLY (hereinafter: the GA) is the highest decision-making body of WBAA. The regularly constituted GA is represented by all WBAA members and has the broadest powers to take, execute or ratify all decisions taken in the interest of WBAA. GA meets once per year and the decisions taken by the GA are binding for all members, including the absent or dissenting ones.

The REGIONAL BOARD (hereinafter: The RB) is the decision-making and the management body, that consists of twelve (12) members (two (2) Representatives from each of the six (6) National Chapters. The members of the RB serve a mandate of two (2) years. They can be re-elected for another mandate, after which they cannot be delegated again.

The LIAISON PERSON is a member of the RB, appointed to support one of the WBAA Teams. Each WBAA Team has one appointed Liaison Person that serves as a connection between the Team and the RB.

WBAA TEAMS support the RB and the associations' work to make best use of the excellence and expertise the WBAA members have.

WBAA Teams are:

- Higher Education Reform and Equal Access to Higher Education
- Quality Mobility and Student Exchange within Higher Education
- Transition from Higher Education to Labour Market and Professional Life
- Research

Each team has a 3-person leadership:

- WBAA Team Head
- WBAA Team Vice Head for Advocacy
- WBAA Team Vice Head for Communication

The ADVISORY COUNCIL is an honorary body that has an advisory role to the RB and its activities. It consists of former Board members and has no executive authority or decision-making powers. Members of the Advisory Council are proposed and appointed by the RB and presented at the General Assembly. The supportive role of the Advisory Council is reflected in its work on establishing and improving WBAA Internal Rules and Regulations, assisting in the interpretation of the Statute and other important documents, and promoting the institutional memory of the organisation and its development.

5. WBAA Regulating documents

WBAA has three regulating types of documents that all WBAA members must observe and comply with. These are:

- 1) WBAA Statutes: the ultimate regulating document
- 2) WBAA Internal Rules and Regulations (IRR): the regulating document deriving from the Statutes
- 3) WBAA Code of Conduct: the document regulating code of conduct for all WBAA members

The very first versions of the Statutes and IRR had been developed and adopted in the GA held in Tirana, Albania in 2019. After this, as the organisation grew further, the Regional Board decided to update both documents regulating additional areas and possibilities for WBAA. These documents are observed by each member upon their membership registration, and must be complied with throughout their membership duration.

The Code of Conduct came at a later stage in January 2022 and had been developed by the Regional Board for all WBAA members. This document is signed by each member upon their membership registration and depicting their obligatory compliance with the principles of democracy, cohesion, solidarity, fairness, respect for and equality among the students and alumni of the Western Balkans region.

6. WBAA Timeline

The following graph shows a visual representation of all the important events, essential for WBAA's growth, throughout the last four years (2018-2022):

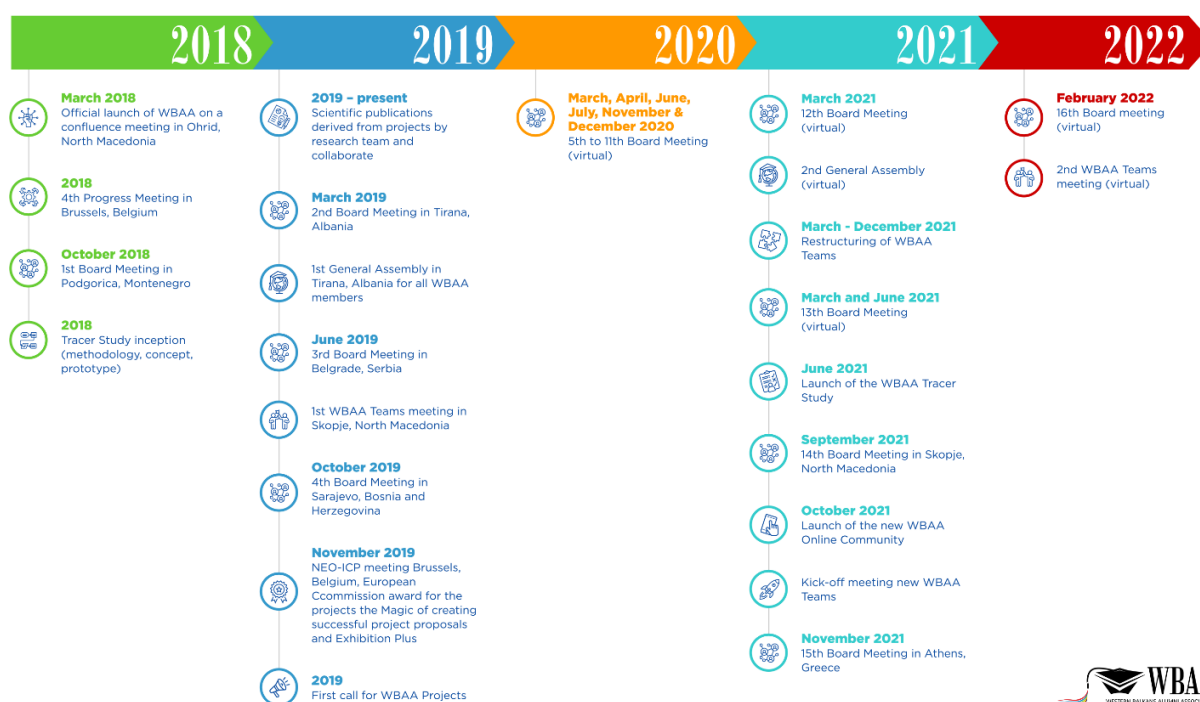


Fig 2 WBAA Timeline of important events

March 2018	Official launch of WBAA on a confluence meeting in Ohrid, North Macedonia
2018	4th Progress Meeting in Brussels, Belgium
October 2018	1st Regional Board Meeting in Podgorica, Montenegro
2018	Tracer Study inception (methodology, concept, prototype)
March 2019	2nd Regional Board Meeting in Tirana, Albania
March 2019	1st General Assembly in Tirana, Albania for all WBAA members
2019 - present	Scientific publications derived from projects by research team and collaborate
November 2019	NEO-ICP meeting Brussels, Belgium, European Commission award for the projects the Magic of creating successful project proposals ² and Exhibition Plus ³
June 2019	3rd Regional Board Meeting in Belgrade, Serbia
June 2019	1st WBAA Teams meeting in Skopje, North Macedonia
October 2019	4th Regional Board Meeting in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
2019	First open call for WBAA Projects
March, April, June, July, November, December 2020	5th to 11th Regional Board Meeting (virtual)
March 2021	12th Regional Board Meeting (virtual)
March 2021	2nd General Assembly (virtual)
March - December 2021	Restructuring of WBAA Teams
June 2021	Launch of the WBAA Tracer Study
June 2021	13th Regional Board Meeting (virtual)
September 2021	14th Regional Board Meeting in Skopje, North Macedonia
October 2021	Launch of the new WBAA Online Community
October 2021	Kick-off meeting for new WBAA Teams
November 2021	15th Regional Board Meeting in Athens, Greece
February 2022	16th Regional Board meeting (virtual)
February 2022	2nd WBAA Teams meeting (virtual)

7. WBAA Today

Since its inception, WBAA has come a long way! Currently WBAA has 939 members.

² <http://tactical-management-in-complexity.com/course/view.php?id=8>

³ <https://international.unsa.ba/exhibition-plus/>

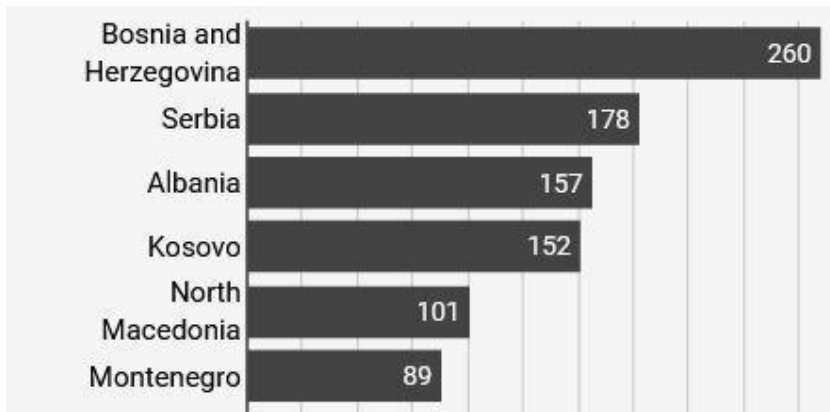


Fig 3 Number of WBAA members per chapter

8. WBAA Teams

In the beginning, WBAA had 5 teams, who covered a particular area of WBAA’s work. These included:

- Team Projects,
- Team Research,
- Team Academic and Career Development,
- Team Internal Affairs,
- Team Communications and IT.

Each team has specific tasks to support the WBAA Regional Board in conducting daily activities and mobilising WBAA members in different ways enabling them to contribute with their own abilities, knowledge and skills.

As WBAA grew further and gained more members, it became obvious that a restructure within the WBAA Teams was necessary. Therefore, in 2020, the Regional Board member with the then Head of Team Projects started a process of restructuring WBAA Teams in a way that suited organisational needs and opportunities. The new concept was presented firstly to the Regional Board at the Regional Board meeting in October 2020 and was later adopted by the General Assembly in March 2021.

Today, there are four WBAA teams that work as a collaborative body and support the objectives of the WBAA organisation according to democratic principles:

- **Higher Education Reform & Equal access to higher education⁴**

Aims to align higher education systems in the WB6, explore the status quo and opportunities for different reform initiatives, e.g. adapting the curriculum to labour market requirements, as well as lobby for the alignment of higher education systems in the WB6 with EU standards

⁴

<https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/teams/higher-education-reform-equal-access-to-higher-education/>

and the strategic frameworks of the EU, the UN and the Council of Europe and finally to advocate for closer cooperation between higher education institutions in the Western Balkans.

- **Transition from higher education to labour market and professional life⁵**

Aims to help the young generation in accomplishing a smooth transition into the labour market by:

- promoting fair competition in the market for young people
- encouraging quality internships, apprenticeships and job shadowing
- Capacity building of WBAA members and young people in the region – soft skills and career skills training
- Promotion of the different benefits of the Erasmus+ Programme for personal and professional development and finally bridging the gap between academia and practice.

- **Research⁶**

Aims to explore and propose research opportunities relevant to WBAA in collaboration with other WBAA teams or with other interested parties. In addition, this team also focuses on the promotion of research findings and recommendations, on seeking and advertising relevant research through the WBAA network and lastly on the support of other research efforts within the network.

- **Quality mobility / student exchange within higher education⁷**

Aims to improve the mobility experience of the young generation in the Western Balkan region. The focus is on visa issues, formal academic recognition of credits, improving the environment for student exchange, internationalisation, advocacy and enhancement of higher education cooperation, cooperation through EU-funded programmes, as well as promoting exchange programmes and the Erasmus+ programme as a driver for international mobility and experience, raising awareness of the added value of joining exchange programmes.

⁵ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/teams/transition-2/>

⁶ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/teams/research/>

⁷

<https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/teams/quality-mobility-student-exchange-within-higher-education/>



Fig 4 WBAA Teams

9. WBAA Projects

The possibility for WBAA members to implement their own project is one of the key activities of WBAA as a regional network contributing to HE reform, research and promotion in WB that also contributes to fulfilment of WBAA objectives.

With WBAA Projects, our members not only get the chance to implement their ideas supporting regional cohesion and collaboration among students, alumni and academic staff in WB, but also advance networking and cooperation with other partners and organisations from the HE context in the region. In addition to that, WBAA Projects often tackle important issues arising from the needs of young people in WB providing constructive solutions and measures to respond to those challenges.

Bringing people together, developing regional project ideas and creating events, concepts and formats that go beyond their boundaries – these are some essential aspects of WBAA Projects. WBAA members can also acquire relevant learning experiences for their personal and professional life. They can create new networks and relations among each other as well as with other local or regional organisations, groups and stakeholders to share knowledge, skills and experiences.

Each project aligns with at least one of the thematic clusters listed below:

WBAA PROJECTS

- CLUSTERS -

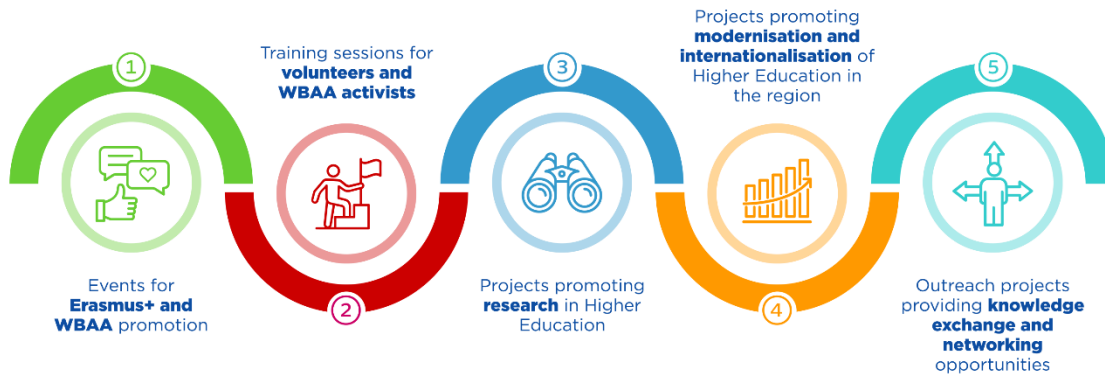


Fig 5 WBAA Projects - thematic clusters

The WBAA Project Scheme consists of three phases:

Phase I: Competition

In the first phase we have the Call for WBAA Projects (the submission deadline is approx. six weeks after publication of the call), the evaluation process and the notifications of the results (six weeks after the submission deadline).

Phase II: Elaboration

In the second phase the accepted project ideas must be developed to a detailed project design including all relevant information (resources, exact timeline, etc.). The service provider (SP) and the submitter will elaborate the project implementation plan together. The SP will support the development of the project. Once the design is ready, the SP and the submitter will conclude with a formal agreement and the project plan will be presented to the EC for its final approval. Given the formal agreement on the implementation plan and the EC's approval the project can enter the third phase.

Phase III: Implementation

In this phase, most costs and expenses can and will be covered according to the implementation plan directly by the EU through the SP, unburdening the project coordinator and the participants from advance payment. The project coordinator will implement the project (in the next six months) and at the end of the project she/he must send a final narrative report to the SP together with a news item (wrap-up).

PROJECT PROCESS SCHEME

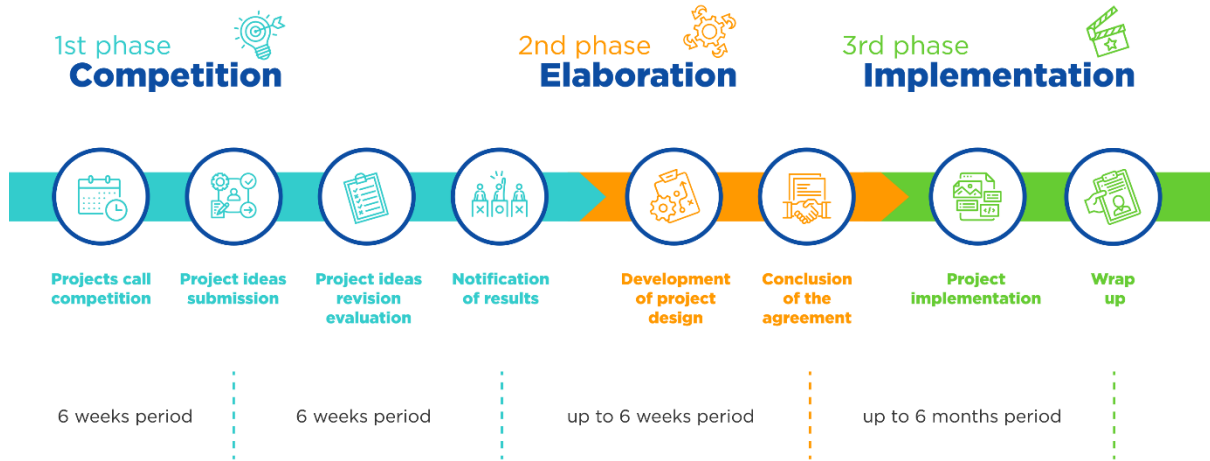


Fig 6 WBAA Project Process Scheme

WBAA Projects represent one of the main tools that gives WBAA members room to express their creativity, to foster outreach, to mobilise local and regional networks and young people and to make WBAA more visible and relevant in WB. Throughout the years 57 WBAA Projects have been realised, and they can be found on the links below.



Fig 7 numbers of realised WBAA Projects by year

2019 - 18 Projects: <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/projects/wbaa-projects-2019/>

2020 - 5 Projects: <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/projects/wbaa-projects-2020/>

2021 - 34 Projects: <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/projects/wbaa-projects-2021/>

The WBAA Projects are essential for the promotion of WBAA, and often people who later become members learn about the network through them for the first time. Most frequently, seminars or workshops are organised by the project coordinators, either online or in person, to which both WBAA members and other people are invited, which increases the level of publicity. The fact that Erasmus+ is promoted by the WBAA Projects shows the interest of the project participants in the programmes. Furthermore, there is often cooperation with other stakeholders, such as universities, other organisations and networks, which strengthens WBAA's connections. Another important aspect is that projects often bring together participants from different chapters, which strengthens regional exchange. Often, manuals or smaller publications are produced within the framework of WBAA Projects, which are also available after the project implementation. Project coordinators can learn important lessons regarding project application, project management and build their professional network. Many project coordinators submit several projects because of this positive experience. In this way, the projects also contribute to the professional development of both the project coordinators and the participants by teaching them skills that are relevant to the labour market. The fact that the project coordinators can freely choose a topic in which they have knowledge and which interests them contributes to the self-efficacy of the mostly younger members. The publications in the context of the WBAA Projects predominate on the WBAA website, in the social media channels and the Online Community, which shows that the network is active and that it offers attractive opportunities for members.

Examples of successful implemented WBAA projects:

Jonida Mersinllari, Chapter Albania: Training sessions in communication development and WBAA promotion

The *training sessions in communication development and WBAA promotion* took place in Stip, North Macedonia, from 25th to 27th October 2019. The project gathered 29 WBAA members from all the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo*, Serbia) for three days focusing on training sessions in skills needed for the WBAA Communication & IT team. The idea for this project was born from the need of more specialized knowledge within the WBAA Communication & IT team. This concerned two specific topics in relation to digital marketing:

- communication strategies and planning
- social media content creation

Furthermore, as the team focused on growing the WBAA community, the WBAA promotion was an important objective. Two parallel sessions were held during the first and the second day of the training. The first training in communication strategies and planning in digital marketing was conducted by the MBA graduate Eduart Vlusha. The training was focused on developing a communication plan used in the digital media and practical aspects of event planning. The second training was conducted by the movie director Gentian Kurti, with

regard to social media content creation (video/image creation and editing). The training session demonstrated in a practical manner how content creation (images/videos) works.

More details and information on the project are available here <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/events/training-sessions-in-communication-development-and-wbaa-promotion/>

And this is a video that was created for the project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjOghtuiIps>

Adnan Rahimić, Chapter Bosnia and Herzegovina: Exhibition plus

The exhibition plus was a 2019 joint project of the Western Balkan Alumni Association (WBAA) and the International Relations Office of the University of Sarajevo. It focused on the innovative and interactive promotion of the Erasmus+ program through an exhibition of photos representing the mobility experience of students and staff from higher education institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project idea was to invite students and staff members to submit photos from their international mobility and transform them into motivational posters. The result was the creation of 40 unique and innovative posters representing the short story about their mobility, motivation to apply and results they have gained. The further aim was to visually send a message and influence the viewer to consider applying to Erasmus+ mobilities. The exhibition was opened during the International Staff Training Week organised at the University of Sarajevo. Many local and international representatives from different European universities attended, including the EACEA representatives who suggested presenting the project in Brussels. The European Commission awarded the project in the category of “positive achievements in the Western Balkans” with the qualifications such as: being inspiring, creative abroad, embracing the true essence, innovation, etc. Today, the photos can be seen at the Rectorate of the University of Sarajevo as a permanent exhibition and non-stopping promotion for the Erasmus+ program. More detailed information and photos are available at the link: <https://www.unsa.ba/en/research-and-cooperation/international-cooperation/exhibition-plus>.

Katarina Elez, Chapter Montenegro: BioINForming - Pilot

Bioinformatics is an emerging science that focuses on the storage, retrieval and analysis of biological data. It is a highly interdisciplinary field that involves natural sciences (biology, chemistry and physics), but also computer science and mathematics / statistics.

The “BioINForming” initiative aimed to fill the gap between the constant growth of bioinformatics and the lack of its promotion among students at high school and undergraduate level in Montenegro. In this pilot project, the project coordinator conducted a preliminary survey among young students at a national level and organised a free-of-charge training school focused on the basics of bioinformatics in January 2022.

Six high school students (5 in-person and 1 online) participated in the training school. The course content was tailored to applicants’ interests and covered: 1) molecular biology and bash scripting, 2) molecular sequence analysis, 3) molecular phylogenetics, 4) protein structure analysis and 5) protein-ligand interactions. The participants applied their newly

acquired knowledge by working together to solve a mystery case. They were also informed about bioinformatics career paths and Erasmus+ mobility opportunities.

The data gathered from the preliminary survey and the feedback received from the training school participants allowed the project coordinator to gain a better understanding of the need for bioinformatics education in Montenegro. As a result, NVO Bioinformatika (Bioinform) was founded, with the goal of promoting bioinformatics among young students.

More detailed information and photos are available at the link: <https://bioinform-org.github.io/training-school/bioinforming-pilot/>.

Dejan Galovski, Chapter North Macedonia: JOB – Preparation Application Simulation

The project “JOB – Preparation Application Simulation” was held from 6- 9 October 2022 in the mountain resort Popova Shapka, North Macedonia. The maximum number of participants in a training session was 20 WBAA members from all six chapters. The project was organised by the project coordinator and one co-coordinator with the support of two local Western Balkan NGOs. The goal of the project was to prepare WBAA members for the job interview and to give skills on how to successfully pass the job interview. Besides the educational part, the project had an aim to make connections among WBAA members who shared their experiences which is an important part of making a strong WBAA community. Additionally participants had a chance to enjoy and hike in the mountain with a professional tour guide.

More detailed information and photos are available at these links:

<https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/job-preparation-application-simulation/>

https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cj-94t_Oqzk/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

Milan Stojanović, Chapter Serbia: WBAA Public Speaking Training

Public Speaking training has successfully gathered 22 highly motivated WBAA members and young activists from the Western Balkans ready to advocate for modernisation of higher education within the region.

The training was held from 14-17 October 2021 in Pancevo, Serbia with the principal aim to increase skills regarding public performance and public advocacy of the present participants.

The project provided Public Speaking and Public Appearance skills, including capacity and confidence building, as a tool for public advocating of modernisation of higher education in the Western Balkan region. The activities on this project have been directed at establishing more efficient utilisation of WBAA resources, increasing performance outcomes of WBAA Teams and improving the WBAA visibility across the region.

The training sessions were designed to include interactive lectures, workshops, as well as individual work and teamwork. Each participant was given a chance to apply the acquired knowledge and perform in public speech in front of a real, professional TV camera and all present participants. In the end, a genuine group feedback was made on the public performance of each of the participants, where everyone had a chance to hear the feedback regarding their own mistakes, as well as the most common errors made in public performance in general.

In addition to the interactive training of Public Speaking skills, the participants were offered a traditional Pancevo city walking tour, as well as a visit to Belgrade.

Finally, the implementation of the project was logistically supported by the local Rotary Club "Mihajlo Pupin" from Pancevo, as well as several non-governmental organisations from the region that actively participated in project promotion and recruiting project participants.

A video was created to to motivate other young people in the region to become part of the Erasmus Plus and WBAA family:

<https://www.facebook.com/milanss2/videos/406128661238002>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10226198567012533&set=pcb.10226198614453719>

10. WBAA Research activities

Another important part of WBAA's contribution to regional cohesion, cooperation and knowledge in the field of higher education and learning mobility is research. This is why one of the WBAA Teams is dedicated to building regional knowledge in relevant topics for WBAA's work.

Over the past years, our WBAA Research team has been contributing to the foundations of scientific research and publications from the WBAA Projects (see list of publications in annex).

The activity of the Research team aims to show how and what can be done to multiply the impact of WBAA's engagement in the region and its development.

10.1 WBAA Tracer Study

One of the most complex and durable undertakings of WBAA and its Research team, has been the co-creation and realisation of the Tracer Study. It has been facilitated by the European Commission, DG EAC, Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna, Austria and members of the WBAA Regional Board representatives and Research team head and collaborates, throughout 2018-2022⁸. The baseline pilot research, conducted by Arber Hajrizaj, paving the foundations for the Tracer study as well as for many decisions during the formation stage of the association, has been the alumni mapping⁹ being designed and carried out by the pioneers of WBAA who then became the first Regional Board members.

The WBAA Tracer Study aims to gather relevant perceptions, opinions, experiences, knowledge, memories, pathways & ideas of students and alumni to contribute to the academic landscape and of the Western Balkan economies. This study's purpose is to support the improvement of the academic and economic aspects of various institutions by collecting qualitative and quantitative data and reliable information from the students and staff who have had an exchange experience, as well as enable the evidence-based evaluation and policy advice of higher education systems in WB.

⁸ https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WBAA-tracer_study-may19.pdf

⁹ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/teams/research/alumni-mapping/> and https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AlumniMapping_WBAA.pdf

The Tracer Study involved alumni from the six Western Balkan economies (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) - who have spent part of their studies outside the Western Balkans in one of the Erasmus+ Programme Countries, either as an EU or non-EU country scholar or as a self-funded individual. In the Tracer Study methodology, the main research instrument was the Questionnaire with close-ended, pre-coded and open-ended questions. The data was analysed and presented disaggregated per WB economy and mobility programme leaving the possibility for further analysis taking into account gender, age and other demographics.

The Tracer Study will result in developing Outputs Report and papers which could ultimately support Western Balkans data-driven actions, decisions and policy making in the field of higher education and learning mobility. The Tracer Study has been very successful in collecting responses and has acquired 1330 in total, while the relevant information will be contemplated in dedicated reports.



Fig 8 WBAA Tracer Study objectives

The Tracer Study has motivated the alumni to engage in it, so that the real potential of the region could be mapped. Its invitation has been entitled **Bring back your experience - let's trace our UNI space!**¹⁰, addressing all WB alumni (not just WBAA members): *“YOU, as the ones who have experienced both education systems (WB and EU) are the ones who can make functional bridges and provide constructive material for making a positive change bottom-up, top-down and lateral, via your own example and through our strong network, to the relevant stakeholders, for our future generations! Voice your experience and ideas from your stay abroad in a competent manner and help contribute to the academic landscape and economies*

¹⁰ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/tracer-study/> and https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WBAA-tracer_study-may19.pdf

of your country and our Western Balkans! Shape pathways toward improvement, innovation, change and excellence. Include your opinions as building blocks of your country's higher education system: If not now - when? If not us - who? Relive through memories a time when you were happy and felt like a fulfilled student and/or professor.”¹¹

10.2 Acknowledgements for the Tracer Study

This research study has been initiated by Arber Hajrizaj, the first Board member from Kosovo, and has been made possible thanks to the research efforts and engagements of the Research Team, headed throughout the years by Asst. prof. dr. Renata Petrevska Nechkoska. Together with the Research team they coordinated the above mentioned scientific outputs.

11. Final thoughts

Remarkable individuals have been recruited to found, build and sustain the WBAA, many of whom are not only members but also play an important role as current¹² and former Regional Board members¹³ and Heads and Vice Heads of the WBAA Teams.¹⁴ The Board members have grown together over time and have found common solutions to problems. The understanding for each other has grown and the adventures experienced together in projects and meetings have been decisive for the growth of WBAA.

The development of WBAA was also only possible due to the continuous financial and strategic support of the European Commission.

Together, as a collective across the WB region, interconnected with the world, the WBAA members co-create, generating emergent effects which continuously improve the higher education in the region, but also its economies and collaboration. WBAA has shown great growth so far and will continue to evolve in the years to come.

¹¹ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/bring-back-your-experience-wbaa-tracer-study-2021/>

¹² <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/members/>

¹³ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/members/former-regional-representatives/>

¹⁴ <https://www.western-balkans-alumni.eu/teams/>

12. Annex

1. *MultiCreation – participatory learning approach for business – academia collaboration* (Petrevska Nechkoska et al., 2019) (approach extended in depth in chapter: Petrevska Nechkoska, R., & Angeloska Dichovska, M. (2019). 'MultiCreation': participatory learning approach for business: academia collaboration. In R. Korez Vide (Ed.), *Teaching Methods for Economics and Business Sciences*, 3rd International Scientific Conference, Book of Abstracts (pp. 13–13). Maribor, Slovenia: University of Maribor Press, Slovenia. URL <https://press.um.si/index.php/ump/catalog/view/474/583/912-1>)
2. *Gamification and blended learning in vocational training and coaching in short courses* (Petrevska Nechkoska et al., 2019)
3. *Engaging Economics and Traffic Engineering Students in Community Issues using the Multicreation Approach* (Petrevska Nechkoska, R., Koltovska Nechovska, D., & Angeleski, M. (2021). *Engaging economics and traffic engineering students in community issues using the MultiCreation approach*. NAŠE GOSPODARSTVO, 67(3), 29–37. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ngoe-2021-0015>)
4. *Evaluation of the online learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic period towards better future approaches of higher education perspectives on the Balkans* (Vrenozi et al., 2020)
5. *Life of young intellectuals in pandemic of Covid 19 virus – case study: Western Balkans Alumni Association (WBAA)*, Mimi Gavriloska, Center for Innovation and Development INOS Prilep, PROCEEDINGS Research Projects of Graduate, Postgraduate and Doctoral Students: Covid 19 Virus – A Test for Digital society (2021) Marija Midovska Petkoska, Natasha Trajkova Najdovska (Eds) ISBN 978-608-66816-0-9
6. Chapter entitled: *PDIA in the Balkans: the Western Balkans Alumni Association (WBAA) as Positive Deviance*, Authors: Renata Petrevska Nechkoska, Arber Hajrizaj, Olga Arsic, Klejda Harasani, Milan Stojanovic, Sabahudin Mujkić, Albana Veseli, Daniela Koltovska Nechova, Tamara Petreska, Adelina Basholli, Tihomir Latinovic, in the Book: *Facilitation in Complexity: From creation to co-creation, from dreaming to co-dreaming, from evolution to co-evolution*, Renata Petrevska Nechkoska, Gjorgji Manceski, Geert Poels (Editors), Springer Nature, 2023 in the chapter domain: EU ENLARGEMENT & REGIONAL COHESION
7. Book: *Addressing trans-regional issues in ITS from managerial and technical perspectives*, resulting from the WBAA project: WBAA<>BRIDGE¹⁵, by the co-authors Daniela Koltovska Nechoska, Renata Petrevska Nechkoska, Mimoza Bogdanoska Jovanovska, University St. Kliment Ohridski Bitola, North Macedonia

¹⁵ <http://tactical-management-in-complexity.com/course/view.php?id=27>