



## FINAL REPORT

### **COST action TN 1302: The Voice of Research Administrators – Building a Network of Administrative Excellence – BESTPRAC**

**STSM Reference Number: COST-ONLINE STSM-TN 1302-30453**

**Title of the STSM - Identifying and transferring best practises in research administration: comparative perspective between Slovenia (UL FA) and Bulgaria (BFU)**

**Applicant:** Luka Vavtar, luka.vavtar@fu.uni-lj.si

**Home institution:** University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Administration (UL FA), Gosarjeva 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

**Host institution:** Burgas Free University (BFU), San Stefano Street 62, 8001 Burgas, Bulgaria

**Duration of the visit:** 15<sup>th</sup> February – 18<sup>th</sup> February 2016 (4 days)

### Summary

The STSM at the BFU represented an opportunity to identify, transfer and strengthen some best practises in connection to research administration, namely between the leading educational and research institution in the field of public administration in Slovenia (University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Administration – UL FA) and a modern, innovative and one of the first non-state universities in Bulgaria (Burgas Free University - BFU). Special attention was paid to the supporting services and good examples surrounding the scientific research process at the institutions, as well as the knowledge transfer process and participation in projects implemented in cooperation with the private sector. Keeping in mind the main purpose of the STSM (to exchange previous experiences from participation on the international projects), the STSM also built on the “student point of view” in order to identify and assess good opportunities in research administration, which also include young researchers, represent grounds for graduates` competitive advantages on the labour market, etc.

### Purpose of the STSM

The main purpose of the STSM was to identify and transfer the best practices in research administration between home (UL FA) and host (BFU) institution. Furthermore, a brief exchange of previous experiences from participation on the international projects was made, thus the STSM also strove to build on possible future collaboration, contribute to better project applications successfulness rates and identify effective networking practises, as well as other barriers and enablers of participation in the EU funded projects. To strengthen cooperation between higher education institutions in Slovenia and Bulgaria is very worthwhile, as these opportunities are usually quite rare (especially in terms of research administration). Consequently, the cooperation in a form of the STSM gave us an insight into the identification of good practices (similarities and differences), while also considering the effect of these activities on the research excellence, student motivation, project application successfulness, etc.

Abovementioned purpose was implemented by getting an insight into the general operation of the work and activities carried out at the BFU (in comparison to the UL FA), which seek to each university's research excellence, while also taking into consideration my STSM's specific goals.

The STSM was focused on the following specific goals:

- To get an overview over internal procedures regarding application and implementation of research projects at the BFU (pre- and post-award stage, especially in connection to the establishment of the pertinent consortium).
- Identify best practises in relation to the possible simplification of procedures or lowering administrative burdens (this will be done by examining and comparing some of the most successful projects on which UL FA and BFU participated).
- Transfer of previously identified best practises (this will be done by assessing the possibilities to implement those practises into research projects procedures at the home institution).
- Determine the potential for possible future collaboration with reference to mutually beneficial participation on the forthcoming calls for proposals (the aim is to establish an ongoing and fruitful research network).

The last (4<sup>th</sup>) aim was established to determine the potential for possible future collaboration with reference to mutually beneficial participation, which is connected to the TN 1302 action's aim (to exchange experiences and share and develop best practices, encourage knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and increased efficiency in project management) as explained hereinafter. The idea of my STSM was to analyze and exchange experiences regarding the successfully obtained projects and especially its preparation, implementation, monitoring and reporting. This includes the following: what are the best practices in the field of e. g. projects coordination and communication, supply and update of the information, procedures regarding the (financial) reporting, budget development – also the coherence of financial and project management functioning, etc. The future collaboration is mentioned to have an added value and to successfully transfer and share the identified best practices (fostering collaboration). So the last aim is introduced with the goal to encourage the knowledge sharing process and to assure that it can be used and implemented continuously (consequently also increasing efficiency in the field of research administration allowing exchanging and networking). Thus, this aim logically supplements the first three aims, but it is not the main one. The main purpose/focus of the STSM is to identify and transfer the best practices in research administration between the home (UL FA) and host (BFU) institution.

## Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM

Activities in connection to my STSM were carried out according to the proposed work plan in the application. The detailed description is being presented in the following table.

### Work plan

Day 1 (15 <sup>th</sup> of February 2016)	Arrival and introduction Meeting with host staff personnel and general presentation of the BFU - with Professor Milen Baltov, PhD (the BFU's Vice Rector of Research and International Cooperation) Review of the STSM work plan
Day 2 (16 <sup>th</sup> of February 2016)	Meeting with Associate Professor Mariya Neicheva, PhD (the BFU's – Faculty of Business Studies' Vice Dean of Academic Affairs and Accreditation) Promoting the UL FA, especially the Research Centre, its projects and research activities (e. g. the International Public Administration Review – the aim was to support researchers at the BFU to cooperate with UL FA and transfer knowledge, publish publications, etc.) General insight into the functioning of the Research Office (mission, structure, research administration management on the daily basis)
Day 3 (17 <sup>th</sup> of February 2016)	Meeting with Associate Professor Lina Anastassova, PhD (the BFU's – Faculty of Business Studies' Vice Dean of Research and International Cooperation) Identifying the selection of best practises regarding the pre- and post-award phase (proposal development, institutional endorsement, ethical issues, etc.) Informing with internal and external communication strategies, practises, the BFU's networking or lobbying activities and efforts to participate in the most pertinent consortiums
Day 4 (18 <sup>th</sup> of February 2016)	Meeting with Assistant Professor Yulia Yorgova, PhD (the BFU's Coordinator of the Student Centre for Career Development) Presentation and analysis of some of the most successful research projects at the UL FA and the BFU with reference to transfer the best solutions, ideas and approaches for higher administration project management efficiency Meeting on the topic of possible future collaboration (mutual applications or submissions of projects, network for encouraging the reciprocally beneficial knowledge and best practises sharing process) Debriefing and official conclusion of the STSM

### Contribution to the goals of the COST Targeted Network

The main contribution of the STSM titled Identifying and transferring best practises in research administration: comparative perspective between Slovenia (UL FA) and Bulgaria (BFU) is connected to the aims of sharing and developing best practices, encouraging knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and increased efficiency in project management. Namely, the work plan was planned in a way to encourage useful know-how practices identification, transfer and strengthening. During my visit, I've done lots of promotional activities of pedagogical and especially research work at the UL FA (including the promotion of the International Public Administration Review, which is being published at my home institution) in order to encourage exchange of knowledge and good practices. Most important good practices, which will be also useful for future implementation at my home institution, were linked to the promotion of research excellence among students. Namely, at the BFU, students have many opportunities to engage in the research process during their studies, therefore representing grounds for better motivation, information literacy, etc.

The STSM also perfectly fitted the stipulated BESTPRAC target group, as I (an early stage administrator from the BESTPRAC inclusiveness country of Slovenia) conducted the STSM in another BESTPRAC inclusiveness country of Bulgaria. The BFU's main host (Vice Rector of Research and International Cooperation, Professor Milen Baltov, PhD) was also in the Management Committees within two COST actions, so he was able to contribute to the STSM successfulness, as he is particularly familiar with its general operation.

My assessment is that the STSM was an interesting, informative and useful experience, which will help my home institution (University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Administration) to further development of the internationalization and improved research & development work, as well as mine personal professional development. I estimate this STSM as a very much preferred supplement to my on-the-job and external training and that the level of planned activities realization was very high, consequently also contributing to the goals of the COST Targeted Network.

#### Description of the main results obtained

Upon my arrival to Burgas and introduction with the host staff personnel, I have got more familiar with the host institution. The BFU was established in 1991 as one of the first non-state universities in the country. In this sense, both institutions are relatively new (the UL FA as a faculty was established in 2003), consequently facing with similar obstacles and challenges: to reduce the gap behind the EU-15 member states in terms of scientific and project excellence. The BFU is a modern and innovative university and also a member of the European Universities Association (EUA). It consists of four faculties: Faculty of Legal Studies, Faculty of Business Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Faculty of Computer Science and Engineering. It is important to note, that the BFU already worked under joint international projects with more than 100 universities and organizations. At the meeting with Professor Milen Baltov, PhD (the BFU's Vice Rector of Research and International Cooperation), we have reviewed my STSM work plan and discussed further arrangements. Professor Baltov also presented the functioning of the Research Office. Unfortunately Mrs. Galina Kalcheva was absent during my visit in Burgas, so the general activities of the Technology Transfer Office was presented to me by Assistant Professor Yulia Yorgova, PhD. The latter, along with Associate Professor Mariya Neicheva, PhD and Associate Professor Lina Anastassova, PhD were of great help in introducing and familiarizing me with the Accounting and Finance Department (regarding projects financial monitoring, budgeting, costs eligibility, direct and indirect costs etc.).

The results of the STSM can be structured and described according to the specific aims:

*- To get an overview over internal procedures regarding application and implementation of research projects at the BFU (pre- and post-award stage, especially in connection to the establishment of the pertinent consortium).*

Strengthening of the institutional networking: in order to successfully participate on the project calls, a necessity to establish a pertinent consortium is of crucial importance. The BFU already worked under joint international projects with more than 100 universities and organizations, they also implemented student and staff exchange programmes with around 25 universities in Europe. Following activities are very important in order to find the right partners: intensive and widespread presence on social media, as well as different online tools (partner search engines), receiving of the newsletters, participation at the networking events, national (and international) "info days", where certain tenders are being presented, etc.

Self-verification (checking) of the research administration personnel's work: I have learnt that it is very useful to constantly monitor the official web pages and other channels of the certain schemes operators (e. g. national agencies, the European Commission, etc.) to detect most common mistakes in the project management. In connection to this, also sections like "frequently asked questions" can be used, as well as other official documents striving to lesser the mistakes (either technical ones – linked to the deadlines, official application forms, etc. or content related – connection to the specific goals of the programme documents, etc.). Furthermore, it is necessary to develop a set of self-evaluating questions that are checked before the official submission of the proposal/report – all in order to avoid unnecessary errors.

*- Identify best practices in relation to the possible simplification of procedures or lowering administrative burdens.*

During my STSM, it became clear that best practices at the BFU are oriented to the general support of the university's research process (it was difficult to determine possible simplifications of procedures or lowering of the administrative burdens). Therefore, the following best practices were identified to address the issues and good examples of supporting the research excellence.

Applicability of the research results: the BFU is closely cooperating with the business incubator in Burgas, which was set up as an initiative under Stimulating Digital Entrepreneurship and is a useful supplement to the universities technology transfer activities. This is also appreciated in terms of research commercialization, as the applicability of certain projects results can be difficult.

Promoting of research work among students: the importance of research work at the university is a very important priority at the BFU. Organization of the annual research conference, which is primarily intended to except students and young researchers is a good example. Due to the good development over the last few years, this conference became well known all over the country and consequently attracts the best and most motivated students from different (eminent) universities. Articles submitted for participation at the conference are also published in a conference proceedings (reviewed and indexed), giving students and young researchers a possibility to publish their scientific work (lots of them for the first time). In order to additionally support attendance and quality publications, students at the BFU have an opportunity to receive suggestions, comments, etc. about their work during the preparation time. It is important to stress out, that students choose the research topic on their own, while mentors are mostly engaged in the empirical elaboration of the article. Articles can also be published in English to attract Erasmus and other international students. This conference consequently assures the development of students' competences, analytical skills, etc., which are very desired by employers. Thus, this event (and publication impacts) can be presented to the potential employers at the BFU career days. Active students can easier get a good internship (45 days must be carried out obligatory) or a job opportunity.

*- Transfer of previously identified best practises (this will be done by assessing the possibilities to implement those practises into research process procedures at the home institution).*

Widen the students' and young researchers' competences: support the research process already during their studies, if possible also by exposing researchers to different working environments and practices. Furthermore, the increasing importance of the international experience is crucial in the process of searching a pertinent consortium, projects lobbying and networking. At the UL FA, we will try to transfer and implement some of the activities conducted at the BFU in connection to the promotion of the research process. First step will be the execution of events called Research coffee for students, on which we will present different research opportunities for students (conference attendance, publications, participation on projects, etc.). We will also start a public discussion at the faculty about organizing a special conference dedicated to students and young researchers, similar as at the BFU.

Institutional and personal networking for further applicability of the research results: this topic is very connected to the knowledge transfer process at the UL FU, for which we also have a faculty vice dean. Under this best practice, we will strengthen the public-private partnership initiatives that are proposed from our institution. Furthermore, special attention will be paid to the expert guest lectures and research projects in connection to the private sector (good example are projects implemented under the initiative The Creative Way to Practical Knowledge – partially funded by the European Social Fund, the call was put out by the Slovene Human Resources Development and Scholarship Fund and joints pedagogical and working mentors, as well as students on the same project). As a result of my STSM, we will try (also in connection to one of our internal project) to set up a detailed selection of possible (international) project partners with emphasis on the private sector. This way, we will strengthen our network and assure further institutional and personal cooperation.

*- Determine the potential for possible future collaboration with reference to mutually beneficial participation on the forthcoming calls for proposals (the aim is to establish an ongoing and fruitful research network).*

Possibilities for future collaboration on the grounds of the previous knowledge and experiences exchange: the idea of this last and additional specific aim for future collaboration is to have an added value and to successfully transfer and share the identified best practices (fostering collaboration). The STSM was also focused on sharing experiences in connection to the Danube macroregional projects (both countries are participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region – EUSDR and the Danube Transnational Programme - DTP). Furthermore, the STSM intended to establish grounds for further collaboration in the future, especially in relation to programmes in which the institutions are most experienced (EEA financial mechanism, Erasmus programme, transnational programmes, etc. – more below).

Identified and discussed successfully implemented projects with the BFU's participation:

- Enhancing E-democracy in Bulgaria – Learning from Iceland; Programme: NGO Programme in Bulgaria - Financial Mechanism of the EEA
- Establishment of a System for Career Development of the Lecturers at BFU and a System for Qualification Improvement - Programme: Operational Programme “Human Resources Development”
- Erasmus Intensive Programme: Strategic Business Decisions in a Risky and Rapidly Changing Environment; Programme: Life-long Learning Programme, Erasmus Intensive Programmes

Identified and discussed successfully implemented projects with the UL FA's participation:

- START - Danube Network of Training Experts for Public Administration – EU Strategy for the Danube Region
- Projects under the initiative “The Creative Way to Practical Knowledge” – Slovene Human Resources Development and Scholarship Fund
- PAT (professionalizing actors of the transfrontier cooperation) - adaptation of selected tools within the TEIN (transfrontier euro-institut network) - European Commission / LdV
- Creativity and innovation for public administration (NEXT4PA) – European Commission / LdV

### Other comments

I would like to express my gratitude to each of the BFU's personnel that I've meet during my stay in Burgas. Their warm reception and guidance was crucial for the successful completion of the STSM. Special thanks to Prof. Milen Baltov, PhD, who was my main host at the BFU for his willingness to assist and help with the arrangements at the university. It was an honour for me to be able to take part in this STSM.