

EUSDR Report June 2015

Priority Area 9

Investing in People and Skills

Education and Training, Labour Market, Marginalised Groups

List of abbreviations

BMBF	Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen
CE	Central Europe
CECE	Central European Cooperation in Education and Training
CEEPUS	Central European Exchange Program for University Studies
CSR	Country Specific Recommendations
DG	Directorate General
DG EMPL	Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
DG REGIO	Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy
DG EAC	Directorate General for Education and Culture
DR	Danube Region
DSP	Danube Strategy Point
DTP	Danube Transnational Programme
EC	European Commission
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe
ESF	European Social Funds
ET 2020	Education and Training 2020
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HCA	Host-Country Agreement
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IVET	Initial Education and Training
JS	Joint Secretariat
KKA	KulturKontakt Austria
LLL	Life-Long Learning
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OeAD	Österreichischer Austauschdienst
OP	Operational Programme
PA	Priority Area
PA9	Priority Area 9
PAC	Priority Area Coordinator
QA	Quality Assurance
QN	Qualification Network
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
SEE 2020	South East Europe 2020 Regional Growth Strategy
SO	Specific Objective
SG	Steering Group
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
TA	Technical Assistance
TAF-DRP	Technical Assistance Facility for Danube Region Projects
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-Based Learning

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
2. IMPLEMENTATION	5
2.1. Policy development	5
2.2. Progress by work area targets, key actions and projects.....	8
3. GOVERNANCE	19
4. FUNDING.....	22

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Priority Area 9 "Investing in People and Skills" of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) has successfully continued its efforts in the fields of education and labour market policies as vital elements to the future development of the Danube Region. For this reason, PA9 has established a network of different stakeholders guaranteeing efficient cooperation between relevant actors, i.a. through the involvement of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives. PA9 activities are focussing on actions i.a. to improve the performance and quality of education and training systems, to foster cooperation between key stakeholders of labour market, education and research policies, to foster creativity and entrepreneurship, to support lifelong learning and learning mobility, to promote social cohesion, active citizenship and to empower actors on all levels in the Danube Region, to improve cross-sector policy coordination, to fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities (especially Roma) and to promote gender equality. The realisation of stakeholder conferences and several thematic events as well as steering group meetings has proven effective in order to boost co-operation and collaboration of relevant stakeholders from countries in the Danube Region. The results of the events (e.g. reports, development of project ideas) were made available to the public via different channels (website, EUSDR PA9 project portfolio ...) which contributed to the sustainable development and to the progress of PA9 activities.

The following concrete outputs of PA9 coordination can be highlighted as of now:

- **PA9 Progress reports** 2012, 2013, 2014
- 2 meetings of **PA9 Steering Group** per year (Spring and autumn 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015)
- 3 **Stakeholder Fora**, up to 160 international participants, partially Minister's level: June 2012, December 2013, November 2014 in Vienna
- Contribution to the **Thematic Events** in the framework of the Annual Forums of the EUSDR: November 2012, October 2013, June 2014
- **Civil Society Forum (CSF) Participation Day** (in cooperation with PA10): June 2014
- **Establishment of up to 8 thematic working groups**, following 8 actions, depending on commitment of DRC, 2012 and ongoing
- **Strategic meeting** of Working Groups related to education (Working Groups 1, 3, 4, 5), October 2012
- **Mapping and labelling** of existing and new projects and initiatives, ongoing
- Agreement on and further development of **PA9 targets and objectives**, 2011 and ongoing
- **PAC participation** in relevant events on EU and regional level (e.g. Annual Fora, NCP-PAC meetings, ERI SEE, CECE), ongoing
- Running of **PA9 website**, ongoing (www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu)
- **Social Media** (Informing stakeholders about events, calls and other activities through social media channels such as Facebook)
- **PA9 Project Folder** (1st edition June 2014, 2nd edition June 2015)
- Position paper "**Proposals for integrating education and training and ensuring a social dimension in the future programme**" for the ETC DANUBE Transnational 2014-2020
- Workshop Conclusions on "**Investing in inclusive and innovative education and training for better socio-economic outcomes**", June 2014
- Conclusions of the Strategic Meeting "**Fostering Cooperation and Institutional Capacity for Roma Integration in the Danube Region**", Vienna, 9-10 October 2014

2. IMPLEMENTATION

2.1. Policy development

Following the achievements of the Annual Forum held in Vienna 2014, the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is continuously progressing. The Strategy further requires a sound coordination by the PACs and a clear commitment from all stakeholders. Priority Area 9 "Investing in People and Skills" has effectively continued its efforts to ensure ownership by a very broad stakeholder community. PACs 9 have successfully established a network of different stakeholders guaranteeing cooperation between relevant actors, i.a. through the involvement of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives. In this way, PA9 - acting as a common umbrella - provides a reference point for many organizations, initiatives and networks in the Danube Region in order to discuss and exchange views on on-going activities, initiatives and policy developments. The added value of the EUSDR and in particular of PA9 has already shown concrete results of innovative approaches of cooperation in the fields of education, labour market and inclusion. Nevertheless, it should be continuously examined to what extent the Danube Region scope can deliver the potential for realistic next steps, where the issues require solutions at local, national state or European level. Learning from others experience and joint development of projects can make very important contributions, but will not replace policies at the respective levels.

Efficient and better policy cooperation in the field of education and labour market is beneficial regarding the integration and the sustainable development as well as social cohesion in the region. The main topics of PA9 - Education and Training, Labour Market and Marginalised Groups - are supporting the strategic framework of Education and Training (ET) 2020, the Europe 2020 and the South East Europe (SEE) 2020 strategies.

The thematic scope of PA9 has also continued to play a prominent role within the set of the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSR) issued at the 2015 European Semester which shows that some countries of the Danube Region are facing similar challenges. While the implementation of stronger and well-functioning systems of vocational education and training is slowly progressing within the region, still, skills mismatches and weaknesses in the education and training system, e.g. in supplying a suitably skilled labour force remain a challenge and also act as deterrents for higher education attainment. Moreover, further measures are needed in making education more inclusive, in particular for disadvantaged groups (such as Roma), elderly people or women. For instance, in order to succeed in education and on the labour market, actions supporting young people, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, need further to be developed. The provision of right competences and the anticipation of necessary skills required by emerging industries such as "Ecotourism" are necessary for the sustainable development of the region. Furthermore, to attract highly qualified persons for the teaching profession, the issue of low salaries and the perception of the profession need to be addressed in parts of the region. Decreasing the number of early school leavers, the availability and quality of early childhood education and care as well as participation in life-long learning pose common challenges in the Region.

Countries of the region are planning and implementing several measures to address those issues and are aiming at a systematic approach to promote the quality of education within the region. For instance, in the area of early childhood education progress is made in Austria (targeting in particular the interface between kindergarten and primary schools), Romania or Slovakia. Work-based learning in VET is being promoted through different measures in various countries. Slovakia, for instance, initiated a new Act on vocational education and training that should enter into force in 2015. Bulgaria has amended the national vocational education and training strategy in 2014. In the area of life-long learning Slovakia is implementing two national projects aiming at the creation of a national system of qualifications and providing guidance and counseling for adults as a tool for better applicability in the labour market. Montenegro is taking further actions to increase the

participation of persons in life-long learning (LLL) programs while Austria is expanding offers for free second-chance education in its "Initiative for Adult education".

Improving educational outcomes and hence the employability of young people with low socioeconomic status is another important initiative that is being pursued by several countries of the region. For instance, Austria is progressing to take further steps to improve the educational achievement of disadvantaged young people, in particular those with a migrant background. The reform of higher education systems is the focus i.a. of Bulgaria, Czech Republic or Hungary. The objective of the reform is i.a. to increase the relevance of tertiary education by aligning it more closely with labour market needs and to improve the accessibility of higher education for disadvantaged groups. The Czech Republic is also drafting a new career system for teachers to be introduced in September 2016 with the purpose to improve the recruitment of teachers and their professional development. Raising the quality of teachers education is also being pursued i.a. by Croatia and Austria.

Other important measures ranging from improving the transition between different forms and stages of education as well as from education to the labour market up to the reduction of the unemployment rate of vulnerable groups such as Roma and of young / elderly people - are being implemented in different scales in countries of the region. Hungary is launching a number of programmes aiming at the inclusion of Roma in the labour market. The implementation of all these measures should further help to improve the situation on the labour market and the education system, make it more relevant to the economy and promote innovation and job creation.

In the current reporting period, Priority Area 9 has continued to address challenges in the region and to develop innovative policies, projects and networks in the field of performance and quality of education and training systems; cooperations in the labour market; creativity and entrepreneurship; life-long learning and learning mobility; social cohesion and active citizenship; demography and migration; poverty and social inclusion; and gender equality.

Providing a framework for (policy-) discussions in the fields of education and labour market through the realisation of PA9 Stakeholder Conferences has proven effective in order to boost co-operation and collaboration of relevant participants from countries of the Danube Region. The 3rd Stakeholder Conference of PA9 on 6-7 November 2015 in Vienna continued the on-going discussion, which started during the previous conferences, and worked towards the common goal of the Strategy to create synergies and coordination between existing policies and initiatives in the field of education and training as well as labour market and marginalised communities taking place across the region. Therefore the conference provided a framework to review the last three years of implementation, to present and to discuss results and issues and to set the right steps for future developments. The conference was introduced by Roland Hanak (PAC9), Jürgen Schick (PAC9) and Marco Onida (DG Regio). Julia Bock-Schappelwein, from the Austrian Institute of Economic Research, made a keynote presentation on "Labour Market, Education and Skills: Challenges in the Danube Region", providing relevant figures and focusing on structural developments of the labour market. The keynote was commented by Klaus Körner (DG EAC) who put the focus on measures (i.a. modernisation of education systems) for tackling issues such as youth unemployment. Key findings of the discussion were i.a. the positive social effects by building networks, the gain of competences through the transfer of best practices as well as the impact on policies by improving i.a. co-operation in vocational training or the integration of marginalised groups. The conference made clear that i.a. the provision of right skills and competences required by emerging industries, the promotion of work-based learning in VET, the reduction of youth unemployment, the empowerment of marginalised groups and the support of active citizenships are important topics to be further addressed in future endeavours. Finally, it has also reconfirmed the huge interest for co-operation by institutions in countries of the EUSDR.

Furthermore, PA9 has set actions i.a. by (co-)organising several events and related thematic workshops that provide space to present and discuss measures, initiatives and actions both from a

policy- as well as project-based perspective. For instance, to tackle the issues of youth unemployment and to serve as a meeting point between formal and non-formal learning institutions, PA9 in collaboration with Interkulturelles Zentrum Wien successfully launched the initiative of an EUSDR Youth Platform of which a first meeting on "Learning pathways to foster social cohesion" took place on 15-17 December 2014 in Vienna (see also Chapter Governance). Following the work of PA9 VET Working Group coordinated by Romania, the planned project "Enhanced Competitiveness and Employability through Innovative Work-Based Learning in VET" led by KulturKontakt Austria aims at supporting the establishment of national and (macro-)regional platforms of dialogue on WBL (see Chapter 2.2. Work Area 1). In addition, another focus of PA9 activities was laid on fostering social cohesion and empowering vulnerable groups, in particular of Roma. For this reason, a thematic conference on "Empowering marginalised groups through education and training in the Danube Region" was held on 2-3 October 2014 in Vienna (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 5). By establishing an expert group on green competences in the framework of the 8th Steering Group meeting in Vienna, PA9 continues on working on the provision of skills and competences. The aim of the expert group is i.a. exploring the emerging needs in "green competences" and priorities for developing respective vocational education and training provisions in the Danube Region, mapping initiatives and relevant activities in the region, as well as engaging multiple stakeholders in identifying concrete future actions in the area of green competences in tourism and their provision in VET. Based on that the experts group is working on the elaboration of a joint application for a TVET international project in the field of green competences for Ecotourism in the Danube Region (see Chapter Governance). Promoting School Cooperation in the Danube Region and thus contribution to the improvement of education and training systems' quality was the topic of a thematic conference which took place on 18-19 June 2015 in Vienna (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 4). Despite the achievements of PA9, continued work is further needed to strengthen the thematic scope of PA9 and raise awareness about the importance of PA9 topics (Education, Labour Market, Marginalised Communities) in related programmes as well as the overall EUSDR framework.

Further steps will be taken in the framework of the 4th Annual Forum on 29-30 October 2015 in Ulm, Baden-Württemberg. It is focussed on topics of innovation, qualification and dual education, entrepreneurship and civil society engagement. PA9, in the area of education and training, is planning to participate at the Forum through contributions related to the workshops on "Enhancing skills and competences through educational cooperation. The workshop will provide space to discuss and develop key actions of PA9 on policy and project level to improve work-based learning in VET, to promote green competences and entrepreneurship as well as to foster social cohesion, active citizenship and regional cooperation (see Chapter Governance). In the area of labour market and marginalised groups two workshops will be organized: "Roma and Sinti: Participation as a Key to Empowerment" and "Labour Market Know-How-Exchange in the Danube Region". Both workshops will give an overview of good practice projects and the space to discuss further activities and possible fundings. A Strategic Planning Conference of PA9, which will continue the discussion on education and training, labour market and marginalised groups, is planned to be held in Vienna, spring 2016.

2.2. Progress by work area targets, key actions and projects

In order to guarantee continuity and coherence with last year's report, the following sub-chapters are structured in line with the PA9 Work Areas. Work Areas have been established according to the Actions of the Action Plan published by the Commission on 8 December 2010. PACs have examined the Commission's target examples provided in the Action Plan accompanying the Communication on the Strategy. The SG of PA9 agreed on targets relevant to the macro-region on 6 December 2011 at its 2nd meeting in Zagreb, Croatia. These targets contribute to the achievement of the Europe 2020 and ET 2020 strategies of the EU. The overall targets in PA9 "Investing in people and skills", as set by the Steering Group, are:

- Contribution to the "Education and Training 2020" strategic framework and its four strategic objectives
- Contribution to the achievement of Europe 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture
- Contribution to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the region
- Contribution to higher synergies of education systems and labour market demands on all levels
- Establishment and implementation of a small project funding mechanism

PA9's Work Plan (see Annex 1) provides an overview of PA9's targets complying with the different Work Areas. PA9 has reached a common understanding where Working Groups can cover the implementation on either entire Work Areas or thematic fields belonging to them. It is thereby ensured that several Working Groups have the possibility to work on one single Work Area.

In the current reporting period, activities of PA9 dealt with i.a. fostering lifelong learning strategies, to facilitate the transition from school to work, to combat youth unemployment and early school drop-outs, to promote work-based as well as company-based learning, to provide access to education and to empower vulnerable groups, to foster intercultural dialogue and to improve education and training systems' performance. Further efforts on existing activities of PA9 towards the continuation of a DR youth platform on formal and non-formal learning are necessary. With regard to emerging industries such as "Ecotourism" and the anticipation of their needs, the field of green jobs and competences was identified as an interesting area for transnational cooperation.

The 3rd Stakeholder Conference on 6-7 November 2014 in Vienna also proved once again the huge interest for co-operation by institutions in countries of the EUSDR. The conference provided a framework to review the last three years of implementation, to present and discuss results and issues and to set the right steps for future developments. In this way the conference acted as a follow-up event and as a step forward linking findings and results of the previous conferences and promoting participants' motivation for the future. The conference made clear that action is needed not only with the aim to improve education and training systems' performance, but also to provide people with the right skills and competences. Finally, the conference showed that it remains essential to provide a comprehensive framework to ensure continuity and sustainability of the work efforts of PA9.

Work Area 1 "To enhance performance of education systems through closer cooperation of education institutions, systems and policies"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 1 are:

- Contribution to the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework and its four strategic objectives (Objective No. 2)
- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives.
- Contribution to higher synergies of education systems and labour market demands on all levels.

The work area on "Enhancing the performance of education systems" deals with improving the quality and efficiency of education and training. The work area is about ensuring the acquisition of key competences, high quality teaching and improving leadership in education as well as developing the attractiveness of education at all levels and VET in particular. Furthermore, it addresses developing effective QA systems and to promote evidence-based policy and practice. The main methods of this Work Area consist in ad hoc meetings, project development meetings, project fair events and peer learning activities (see Annex 1).

In the reporting period, cooperation platforms and networks such as Central European Cooperation in Education and Training (CECE) continued their on-going activities and efforts. Since its establishment in 1997 CECE provides space for discussion and exchange of expertise and good practice on administration level through joint conferences, seminars and expert workshops in all areas of lifelong learning. A meeting on "The promotion of foreign language learning in the CECE countries" took place on 16 December 2014 in Budapest focussing i.a. on proficiency levels requirements in and assessment of foreign languages competences at different education levels. The CECE initiative also promotes increased content-related and organisational cooperation on the EU level. A coordination meeting on DG level was held on 7-8 April 2015 in Bratislava and discussed i.a. new developments, priorities and reforms in education and training policies in CECE countries as well as in the framework of the current and incoming EU Presidencies (e.g. the revision of the strategy framework ET 2020, the role of education in the future European Semester etc.). In 2014, the rotating informal CECE-Presidency was held by Hungary followed in 2015 by Slovakia.

The Education Reform Initiative in South East Europe (ERI SEE) has continued successfully its role as a regional platform for dialogue and cooperation in the field of education and training. With regard to the planned opening of ERI SEE Secretariat in Serbia – responsible for the implementation of the work programmes – by now all ERI SEE member countries have signed the Host Country Agreement (HCA) with Serbia. Through activities such as enhancing institutional cooperation in vocational education and training, initiating policy dialogue on and cooperation in the field of reducing early school leaving and dropping out of school, ERI SEE is supporting national education reform efforts in the region as well as promoting regional cooperation between the education sector and different stakeholders. For instance, a regional workshop on Teacher Education and Training took place in Tirana on 22-23 January 2015. The overall objective was to improve the quality of teachers' education and to provide suggestions as to how the concept of professional development for teachers should be supported in the SEE 2020 beneficiaries in the region. ERI SEE remains actively involved in the development of the SEE 2020 strategy. To create synergies and to foster activities between PA9 and ERI SEE, the collaboration is further intensified through participation at relevant events and meetings (e.g. PAC participation at the ERI SEE Governance Board Meeting on 24 April 2015 in Belgrade, ERI SEE representatives participation at 3rd Stakeholder Conference on 6-7 November 2014 in Vienna, at the thematic conference on "Empowering marginalised groups through education and training in the Danube Region" on 2nd

and 3rd October 2014 in Vienna and at 9th SG Meeting on 28-29 May 2015 in Podgorica). Furthermore, common activities of PA9 and ERI SEE could be considered starting 2016.

VET and work-based learning have turned out to be key issues in the Danube Region with a particular strong macro-regional impact. With the purpose to continue the successful cooperation in the area of VET the Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs of the Republic of Austria and the Ministry of National Education of Romania signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in November 2014. Improving human capital development by contributing to the life-long development of individuals' skills and competences is also the focus of the activities set by the European Training Foundation (ETF). In its 2014 Work Programme, first annual work programme of the mid-term perspective 2014-2017, it follows i.a. the objectives to increase the relevance of VET provision through innovative approaches and to support countries in modernising their VET systems in a life-long learning perspective.

Engaging multiple stakeholders in identifying concrete future actions in the area of green competences in tourism and their provision in VET is the main activity of an expert group which was established based on a proposal by the Romanian Ministry of National Education and the National Centre for TVET during the 8th Steering Group Meeting of PA9 in Vienna on 5th November 2015. The experts group is i.a. exploring the emerging needs in "green competences" and priorities for developing respective vocational education and training provisions in the Danube Region as well as mapping initiatives and relevant activities in the region. The group is thereby acting as a facilitator for common developments in TVET and mobilising interest of EUSDR participating countries for the topic of green competences. In addition, the experts group is working on the elaboration of a joint application for an international project in the field of green competences for tourism in the Danube Region. For this reason an International Conference on "Green Competences on Ecotourism in the Danube Region" took place on 8th June 2015 in Comana followed by the first meeting of the experts group on 9th June 2015 in Bucharest. The conference assembled representatives from ministries, VET providers, companies in the field of Ecotourism, tourism associations and other relevant institutions from the Danube Region. Both meetings enabled to set links with Priority Area 3 "Culture and Tourism" and Priority Area 6 "Biodiversity, landscapes, quality of air and soils" (see Chapter Governance).

The project "Cooperation between Schools and the Business Sector in the field of tourism" led by KulturKontakt Austria (KKA) aims at enhancing the quality of practical training for pupils by promoting cooperation between partners from the tourism sector and schools of tourism and hotel management. The regional focus of the project enables the exchange of experience between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Austria.

Work has continued also towards the development of the planned project "Enhanced Competitiveness and Employability through Innovative Work-based Learning in VET". The project idea builds on the work of PA9 VET Working Group coordinated by Romania and supports the establishment of national and (macro-) regional platforms of dialogue on WBL. A regional workshop on "Work-based Learning in Vocational Education and Training: Enhanced Competitiveness and Employability through Innovative Work-Based Learning" was held by PA9 and KulturKontakt Austria on 13-14 October 2014 in Vienna for countries interested in joining an ETC-application as full and co-financing partners. The discussion of the workshop was focussed i.a. on how to introduce work-based learning sustainably into education and training systems and gathered representatives from ministries of education and labour market, social partners, companies and VET agencies from Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Romania.

The project "National Authorities for Apprenticeships: Development of Apprenticeship Learning in IVET in Romania" (DALIVET) led by the National Centre for TVET Development (NCTEVT) aims i.a. to create a starting point for the development and introduction of a work-based learning and training opportunity for young people as well as developing the basis of a legal framework for

introducing apprenticeship in IVET. The results will comprise i.a. a feasibility study, a master plan for the implementation of the feasibility recommendations, a training programme as well as the dissemination of information. As a follow-up to the project "Capacity Building for Teachers of VET in the Danube Region", a Romanian-German working group on vocational education was set up in order to develop and implement a joint project on the topic of modernising the vocational system in Romania.

An important project in this area also represented "Edu.Region – Education Network for the economic area and the labour market of Lower Austria and the Southern Czech Regions" which dealt with the provision of key competences needed on the labour market. The project also prepared teaching aids and proposals for appropriate events teaching interregional competences and knowledge about the cross-border region.

Work Area 2 "To foster cooperation between key stakeholders of labour market, education and research policies in order to develop learning regions and environments"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 2 are:

- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional co-operation networks and initiatives.
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture.
- Contribution to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the region.
- Contribution to higher synergies of education systems and labour market demands on all levels.

The aim of Work Area 2 is mainly to increase innovative capacities of the labour force in the Danube Region and to establish new forms of partnerships and cooperation among key stakeholders (labour market, education and training, research and employers). Employers (private, public and voluntary) have an important role to play in identifying the knowledge, skills and competences needed in working life. To increase the employability and entrepreneurial potential of all learners, communication and active cooperation should be further developed between education and training institutions on the one hand and employers on the other.

Within this Work Area several "Danube"-labelled projects have been continuing their roll-out:

The aim of the project "Bilateral Labour Market Cooperation Austria-Moldova is to inform relevant actors about labour market structure and the improvement of chances for unemployed people in the Republic of Moldova through qualification in the construction sector. This project is related to the ADA-Project "Building Academy in Moldova" which gives unemployed young people the chance of a qualification within the dual system and is therefore a good example for the aligning of funds.

The project KOOP Austria-Ukraine - Bilateral Labour Market Cooperation 2013 - 2015 aimed to establish a network between relevant Ukrainian and Austrian labour market policy actors (Ministries, Public Employment Services, Social Partners, qualification providers etc.) to address current Ukrainian labour market policy issues and challenge and to provide a knowledge transfer.

The "Virtual Education Network for Austrian Companies in Bulgaria" aimed aimed at supporting Austrian companies in Bulgaria with boosting competitiveness of their personnel, by setting up of a qualification network (QN) in Sofia. A QN is a cluster-like alliance of at least 3 companies that share the common goal to increase the professional level of their employees, by means of jointly planning and implementing corresponding training measures.

The project “Qualification Network for Austrian Companies in Romania” at supporting Austrian companies in Romania with boosting competitiveness of their personnel, by setting up of a qualification network (QN) in Bucharest. A QN is a cluster-like alliance of at least 3 companies that share the common goal to increase the professional level of their employees, by means of jointly planning and implementing corresponding training measures. Ten Austrian companies in Romania joined the QN, which was set up in December 2014. Extensive consultancy measures (organizational culture and training needs analyses, identifying and liaising with training providers) have been carried out throughout the project aiming at laying the foundation for future joint initiatives to access ESF financing for trainings.

The 3 bilateral projects called Experts Academy between Austria and the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia provided regional actors of labour market policy with a forum for exchange of information and expertise, design and implementation of common projects and cross-border cooperation in the field of labour market policy. The activities of the projects focused on the following fields of action:

- Preparation of annual reports which included the latest study results, data analyses and results of interviews with labour market experts.
- Development and implementation of cross-border projects.
- Establishment of a website (expak.at).
- Establishment and support of a systematic information and cooperation of the public employment service of the involved countries.
- Organisation of conferences, seminars, excursions and internships for a mutual exchange of information and for the discussion of the developments on the employment markets and in employment market policies.

Work Area 3 "To support creativity and entrepreneurship"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 3 are:

- Contribution to the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework and its four strategic objectives (Objective No. 4)
- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives.
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture.

Work Area 3 primarily deals with transversal key competences, entrepreneurship education and the promotion of innovative learning environments and creative partnerships between education, culture, civil society and the economy (see Annex 1). The Thematic Working Group "Creativity and Entrepreneurship" is led by the Business Support Centre for SMEs in Ruse, Bulgaria. Following the results of the first two meetings (Sofia 2013, Ruse 2014), Working Group 3 "Creativity and Entrepreneurship" continued its activities on gathering about best-practice examples as a basis for the development of further projects as well as on informing about funding opportunities for project ideas and initiatives (e.g. Erasmus+, Creative Europe etc.). A 3rd meeting of the working group was held in Bucharest on 18 May 2015. The Working Group has a strong link to the South East European Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning (SEECCEL), to the START funded project "Danube Competence Centres for Creativity and Entrepreneurship" as well as to "i.e. SMART" project, which was recommended by the SG and has been granted funding by the ERDF OP "Central Europe".

The START funded project "Danube Competence Centres for Creativity and Entrepreneurship" led by the Business Support Centre for SMEs in Ruse has started in January 2015 and deals with the establishment of a centre for creativity and entrepreneurship that will represent a network for

exchange of practices. It will foster creativity and entrepreneurship through the transfer of approaches and through the development of new curricula or trainings. The project will support to anticipate necessary skills on emerging industries for the future. Expected results are i.a. a study of additional good practices in the field of creativity and entrepreneurship transferable to the Danube Region as well as the development of a detailed project concept and budget for the establishment of Danube Competence Centres for Creativity and Entrepreneurship. Six participating countries (AT, BG, CZ, HU, MD, RO) are involved in the project.

Within Work Area 3, the EUSDR Pilot Project "Empowering Young People - Connecting Europe" was implemented by KulturKontakt Austria between 2012 and 2014. The aim of the project was to support new approaches in teaching / learning to empower students to take an active role in shaping the future of their region. Around 110 teachers have gained experience in regional project implementation. 400 students have actively participated in four regional projects in fields relevant for the Danube Region. The schools shared their project results and experiences at a final event in Vienna. The "Danube Region Project Portfolio" – an innovative teacher's guide is available to teachers/schools in the Danube Region and others (Link to the portfolio: www.mahara.at/user/kulturkontakt-austria).

The "i.e. SMART" project (2012-2014) led by Stadtschulrat Wien has identified specific issues in the partner regions e.g. low survival rate of business start-ups, high youth unemployment etc. To tackle these issues, the project has developed and implemented a transnational management structure to link the involved regions so that they can provide their citizens with sustainable labour market opportunities through a new multi-disciplinary training approach to innovation and entrepreneurship.

The project "(d)unavision" led by ThinkCamp continued its activities in the reporting period in promoting people-to-people contacts and mutual entrepreneurial learning as well as sustainable development along the Danube. This year it has organized the "Vision Walk" – a learning journey through two national parks in Macedonia. These events brought people from the Danube and Balkan Region together to work on a common vision and activities for a sustainable future. Its results will flow into the follow-up "100 day – unaVision lab 2014/2015". The plan is to establish a network of unaVision Being Spaces, which are incubators for the sustainable development of the society in the Danube Region.

Work Area 4 "To support life-long learning and expanding learning mobility"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 4 are:

- Contribution to the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework and its four strategic objectives (Objective No. 1)
- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives.
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture.

Progress in this area was achieved, in particular through activities and cooperation efforts addressing lifelong learning, the development of NQFs and learning mobility.

Following the success of the Thematic Conference on "Learning, Teaching, Exchanging – School Cooperation in the Danube Region" (June 2014) a follow-up conference took place on 18-19 June 2015 in Vienna. The meeting assembled more than 50 teachers from 11 countries and provided them the opportunity to discuss within workshops about challenges and benefits of cooperation between schools in the Danube Region and to create future partnerships. The seminar organized by

the National Agency of Life-long Learning, the Austrian National eTwinning Support Service and PA9 contributed to a better understanding of eTwinning (www.etwinning.net) and possible cooperation of school in the Danube Region.

In this context of learning mobility, CEEPUS remains a vital programme. Since its beginning in 1995 the programme constantly grew and operates now in 69 networks with 1025 institutions involved.

In order to create synergies between activities carried out by ERI SEE and the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) in the area of recognition of qualifications, a meeting of the BFUG Regional SEE Working Group on Recognition of Qualifications was held on 22 September 2014 in Zagreb. The event was followed by a seminar on "Removing obstacles to recognition of qualifications" which took place on 23 September 2014 in Zagreb. The seminar brought together representatives of ministries of education, European Training Foundation (ETF) as well as Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and aimed at i.a. to upgrade competencies for amending national legislative framework on recognition of qualifications.

The project "ESCAPE – Enhanced Skills, Competence and Practice for the Economy" led by Bundeshandelsakademie Linz (BHAK Linz) has started in September 2015 and aims at setting up a network of schools, educational institutions and labour market institutions that should cooperate to improve education and training and to enhance chances of graduates to get jobs. Activities are i.a. to develop new formal and informal teaching and learning methods, to investigate and compare job creation schemes in different countries, to cooperate with international companies and to establish a curriculum for a Business Academy for the Danube Region.

The implementation of life-long learning strategies and to increase their impact for individual learners remains a challenge in many countries of the region. The START funded project "Milestones of Learning Development – Strategic improvement and development of life-long learning programs within Danube Region" has started their activities in January 2015 and is led by the South-East European Youth Network (SEEYN). The aim of the project is to improve and enhance the work of SEEYN regarding life-long learning activities by identifying needs and requirements of users, by establishing relevant partnerships and by developing an action plan and specific actions. The project aims at addressing the development of contemporary, innovative and long-term methods for improvement of LLL on the large scale, as well as immediate implementation of its outcomes.

Work Area 5 "To promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through education and training"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 5 are:

- Contribution to the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework and its four strategic objectives (Objective No. 3)
- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives.
- Contribution to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the region.

The focus on the work area lies i.a. on promoting equal opportunities in learning to contribute towards the social inclusion of individuals from minorities and vulnerable groups. It also deals with promoting active citizenship, tolerance, intercultural dialogue and non-discrimination through education. PA9 is actively contributing to the work area by organising thematic events which foster mutual learning and facilitate an exchange on best-practices (see Annex 1).

A thematic conference on "Empowering marginalised groups through education and training in the Danube Region" took place on 2nd and 3rd October 2014 in Vienna. The event was organised by the OeAD - National Agency for Life-long Learning in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs, Austria (BMBWF) as EUSDR Priority Area Coordinator 9. It served as a platform in order to initiate meaningful synergies on the topic of social inclusion of individuals from vulnerable groups, in particular the Roma communities. The conference provided participants with the opportunity to discuss, to share mutual learning on best practices and to elaborate project ideas within workshops along 4 topics: early childhood education and early school leavers, literacy skills and participation of family education, vocational education and training, awareness raising and networks focussing on Roma.

In order to promote and to empower young people Interkulturelles Zentrum Wien in collaboration with PAC9 has started the initiative of a Youth Platform within PA9. The objectives of the initiative are i.a. that the platform serves as an annual meeting of practitioners from the formal and non-formal educational field to foster partnerships at the interface of education (formal and non-formal), training and youth, share experiences, good practices of cross-sectoral cooperation and encourage project development organized in the framework of Erasmus+. In addition, the initiative aims at contributing to the achievement of Europe 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth and to the strategic framework "Education and Training 2020" in particular as well as to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the Danube Region. The 1st EUSDR Youth Platform meeting on "Learning Pathways to Social Cohesion" was held on 15-17 December 2014 in Vienna and brought together participants from all 14 EUSDR countries. Based on the needs expressed by the participants the EUSDR Youth Platform will be organized on a regular basis to provide an opportunity to discuss common, cross-sectoral initiatives and will try to involve decision makers in the future to maximize the overall impact.

Further important project examples in this area focus on fostering cooperation of young people, such as ACES, and the cooperation between schools and communities, such as CoDeS. ACES, led by Interkulturelles Zentrum Wien, aims at creating a sustainable network of shared knowledge, mutual learning and innovation, while the "CoDeS project", led by Stiftung Umweltbildung, is a Comenius multilateral Network funded by the Life-long Learning Program from EU that focuses on school community collaboration addressing sustainability.

The project "Concordia Vocational Education" aims i.a. at guaranteeing access of socially disadvantaged teenagers to quality education and promoting learning experiences across diverse social environments. It furthermore aims at fostering relevant skills and competences for the labour market such as the ability to work in a team, reflective decision-taking and assuming responsibility.

Developing an operational platform for regional cooperation and exchange of information on the role of sustainability issues and the implementation of EU policies into the school curricula is pursued by the project "eSchool4S" led by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The project develops interdisciplinary, interactive and web-based teaching and learning concepts and it intends to show to which extent every country can contribute to the European integration, and what opportunities and challenges this integration would cause.

The newly labelled project "Danube Peace Boat E.U.R.O.P.E" led by Media Education Centre is designed to provide students and teachers with skills and knowledge in media and to encourage cooperation between schools and organisation with background in Media, Information and Peace Literacy in the Danube Region. The project acts as a media initiative for building of interactive and intercultural educational models and for motivating decision makers in local communities. Expected results are that at the end of its implementation participants have developed and produced unique film, animation, reports and blogs on a wide range of social, educational, cultural and environmental topics. All results will be disseminated through the network and through local media.

Work Area 6 "To improve cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 6 are:

- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional co-operation networks and initiatives.
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture.
- Contribution to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the region.

The aim of Work Area 6 is mainly to develop knowledge on the status quo, on drivers and impacts of migration flows and demographic change, so to develop a basis for enhanced cooperation of different policies at all levels of governance. For example, Serbian Law on employment of foreigners was adopted in November 2014. This Law governs the conditions and procedure for employment of foreigners in the Republic of Serbia and other issues relevant for employment and work of foreigners in the Republic of Serbia. Drafting of Cross-sector policy coordination between relevant government departments, education authorities, social services, healthcare services, cultural policy authorities, housing and spatial planning authorities as well as asylum and immigration services at local, regional and national level, as well as dialogue with civil society are essential to ensure an adequate level of support. Spatial consequences of migration-induced social, economic and cultural changes and possible responses in the framework of urban and rural development should be considered.

The network of South East Europe Public Employment Services, the CENTROPE project partners, the CE ageing network, the RETURN network and the network of IOM Missions in the Danube region were listed as existing partnerships and networks which are used to set up a knowledge management tool in the form of a project proposal on the establishment of a web-based platform on labour mobility. Work has to be done to find appropriate funding for the project - most likely the DANUBE Programme - and to find co-funding from all participating countries.

There have been four meetings up to now within Work Area 6. The last meeting took place on 24 and 25 June 2014 in Eisenstadt in the framework of the "Participation Day" within the EUSDR Annual Forum. It was a joint working group meeting of PA9/Working Group 6 and PA10/Working Group 1 as a joint meeting of Working Group 6 on cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges under PA9 and Working Group 1 on Public Administration Reform under PA10. Furthermore there was a meeting of the Austrian Association of Cities to the topic "Poverty and Migration" (Wels, 19th March 2015) where Roland Hanak informed about ESF funding.

The project SEEMIG – Managing Migration and its Effects in South-East Europe closed its activities in November 2014. In this multi-level partnership 18 research institutes, universities, NGOs, local municipalities from 8 SEE countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia) were active. The aims were: to better understand and to address longer term migratory, human capital and demographic processes of South-East Europe, their effects on labour markets, national and regional economies, empower public administrations to develop and implement policies and strategies by using enhanced datasets and empirical evidence.

Work Area 7 "To fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the Danube Region, especially the Roma communities"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 7 are:

- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional co-operation networks and initiatives.
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture.
- Contribution to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the region.

Work Area 7 deals with improving the situation of marginalised communities, especially the Roma communities. To make full use of the Danube Region's population specific focus needs to be put at empowering in particular groups in risk of poverty and ensuring them access and opportunities. Children, old people, mentally and physically disabled, immigrants, homeless, representatives of marginalised ethnic groups are the most vulnerable. Actions to reduce the number of people in risk of poverty need to complement each other, applying an integrated approach. Especially on Roma communities, whose living conditions are often especially dire and with no place in 21st century Europe, special attention must be paid. Hence the coordination of efforts between existing initiatives and actors such as the Roma Decade (2005-2015), EU Roma platform for Roma Inclusion, EU-Roma network and NGOs active in this field in the Danube Region is indispensable for improving the situation for Roma. A project of NGOs from Austria, Bulgaria and Romania has been planned under the PROGRESS program.

In addition, another focus was laid on fostering social cohesion and empowering vulnerable groups, in particular of Roma. For this reason, a thematic conference on "Empowering marginalised groups through education and training in the Danube Region" was held on 2-3 October 2014 in Vienna. The aim was to inform ROMA-NGOs about funding possibilities and there were about 70 people from the region.

In the new programming period Austria has planned to start pilot projects under participation of Roma Organizations within the European Social Funds. This ESF-Call for Roma-Empowerment was already launched in Austria and about 8 projects should be implemented in the next 42 months. Relevance for the Danube Region is given through the high number of migrants from the states of this region and the possibility to cooperate with other projects in the Danube Region

Work Area 8 "To promote gender equality on the labour market, especially in payment"

Related PA9 targets of Work Area 8 are:

- Contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets, in particular with regard to smart and inclusive growth.
- Efficient cooperation between relevant actors through involvement and extension of existing regional co-operation networks and initiatives.
- To foster creative partnerships at the interface of education, training and culture.
- Contribution to the improvement of labour markets and social inclusion in the region.

Equality between women and men is one of the European Union's founding principles. To create equal opportunities for women and men on the labour market, discrimination, educational stereotypes, labour market segregation, precarious employment conditions, involuntary part-time work and the unbalanced sharing of care responsibilities with men must be overcome. The full realization of women's potential and the full use of women's skills must be fostered with the

emphasis to facilitate a better gender distribution on the labour market and to allow the number of quality jobs for women to be increased.

Besides the discrimination against women in career opportunities, the discrimination against female employees with regard to their wage level is imminent. The so called gender pay gap (the average difference between men's and women's hourly gross earnings across the economy as a whole) in the EU remains at 17.8%, with heights around 30% in some EU member states.

To ventilate this topic a stakeholder forum involving social partners, had been initiated. This forum explored possible ways to improve the transparency of pay as well as the impact on equal pay of arrangements such as part-time work and fixed-term contracts. State of play is to realize the 2nd meeting, in order to exchange information and experiences about the already identified common needs and topics gender equality strategies, parental leave schemes and working time arrangements. As performance of this Meeting the Austrian PAC became member in the Gender Mainstreaming Working Group of the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection to prepare the development of project ideas.

3. GOVERNANCE

Based on the well-established working structure implemented within the previous years of the EUSDR, PA9 effectively continued its work efforts in order to improve and strengthen the governance of the PA. PACs have successfully established a network of different stakeholders guaranteeing efficient cooperation between relevant actors, i.a. through the involvement of existing regional cooperation networks and initiatives. Furthermore, national coordination networks have proven to be useful and worthwhile when it comes to coordinating the implementation process of the EUSDR. In several countries national platforms on the EUSDR are organised on a regular basis and contribute significantly to a mutual exchange.

The chosen work mode of the PACs, which has put the ownership of initiatives and common success strongly at its centre, provides a sound basis for sustainable cooperation.

Priority Area 9 is coordinated by Austria and the Republic of Moldova, with the involvement of a wide network of key players and stakeholders from the 14 countries of the Danube Region. On behalf of Austria, Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, and Jürgen Schick, Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs act as Priority Area Coordinators. On behalf of the Republic of Moldova, in June 2015 Ludmila Pavlov, Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova, was nominated as new PAC following Ion Gumene from the State Chancellery. Adriana Rosca, Ministry of Education, and Rodica Russu, Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family support the new PAC.

With regard to the Steering Group Meeting, Stakeholder Conference as well as other events, the overall participation of DR countries in PA9 is in general satisfactory. Still not all DR countries are regularly participating in the SG both in the area of education and labour market (e.g. BA, SI and UA).

<i>Event</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>BG</i>	<i>CZ</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>HR</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>ME</i>	<i>RO</i>	<i>RS</i>	<i>SI</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>UA</i>	<i>ET F</i>	<i>EA C</i>	<i>RE GI O</i>	<i>EM PL</i>	<i>ERI - SE E</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-	x
<i>SG8</i>	x	-	x	-	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-	x	-	x	-	-	-	-
<i>SG9</i>	x	-	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	-	-	-	x	-	x

Table 1: Attendance of PA9 meetings

The SG can be seen as the main body of coordination within the framework of PA9. The 8th meeting of the SG took place in Vienna on 5th November 2014, back-to-back with the 3rd Stakeholder Conference (see Annex 2) and discussed i.a. the results and impressions on the 3rd Annual Forum and in particular on the workshop of PA9 "Investing in Inclusive and Innovative Education and Training for better Socio-Economic Outcomes". The meeting also dealt with recent developments within the EUSDR on European level (e.g. establishment of the Danube Strategy Point at the Permanent Representation of Baden-Württemberg in Brussels) as well as with funding opportunities of projects and PA9 activities (such as Technical Assistance (TA), ETC DANUBE Programme 2014-2020 or START – Danube Region Project Fund). The 9th meeting of the SG of PA9 was held in Montenegro on 28-29 May 2015. It provided space for SG members to give an overview on the reform priorities in the area of Education and Labour Market Policy of their respective country. Furthermore, the meeting enabled the discussion and exchange of experience related to the activities of each working area and continued its efforts to provide information on funding of projects or PA9 activities. An important topic of the meeting was also the preview of the programme and PA9 contributions regarding the 4th Annual Forum which will be held on 29-30 October 2015 in Ulm.

In the reporting period coordinators of PA9 and several of its SG members have continued to participate in a wide range of conferences, workshops and meetings organised by other actors. In particular, PACs have participated i.a. at the 5th meeting of National Contact Points and Priority Area Coordinators meeting on 26 January 2015, meeting of the EUSDR Priority Area Coordinator on 13 February 2015 in Stuttgart and 8 May 2015 in Brussels, meeting of the EUSDR National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators on 24 and 25 June 2015 in the framework of a Floating Conference, the TAF-DRP and START review meeting on 20 March 2015 in Vienna as well as the ERI-SEE Governance Board Meeting on 24 April 2015 in Belgrade. The Floating Conference on 24-25 June 2015 provided space to discuss issues (e.g. supporting activities for PACs, handling of Technical Assistance 2015/16 etc.) related to the newly established Danube Strategy Point (DSP) and allowed to meet the new team. At this stage it remains open in which way the DSP will act as a useful and effective support to the work efforts of the Priority Area Coordinators.

Austrian PACs also regularly attend Austrian national coordination platform meetings as well as informal meetings between PACs and Austrian SG members of other PAs (e.g. extended EUSDR Platform on 13 May 2015 in Vienna as well as Meeting of Austria Priority Area Coordinators on 8 June 2015 in Vienna).

Following a first meeting on 26th June 2014 within the framework of the 3rd Annual Forum of the EUSDR, the cooperation between EUSBSR coordinator of PA education and PA9 has continued (e.g. participation of EUSBSR representative at the 3rd Stakeholder Conference of PA9 on 6-7 November 2014 in Vienna, participation of PAC9 at EUSBSR SG Meeting on 10-11 December 2014 in Hamburg).

As indicated above providing a framework for discussions in the fields of education and labour market through the realisation of stakeholder conferences has proven effective in order to boost co-operation and collaboration of relevant stakeholders from countries of the Danube Region. Following the achievements of the previous stakeholder conferences (June 2012, December 2013) of PA9, the aim of the third conference on 6-7 November 2014 was to provide a framework to review the last three years of implementation, to present and discuss results and issues and to set the right steps for future developments. The conference assembled 115 participants from 13 countries of the Danube Region (only Ukraine was missing).

Setting links with relevant stakeholders has been ensured by PA9 through the organisation of several thematic conferences and events which foster discussion on topics such as Empowering Marginalised Groups (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 5), Supporting Young People (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 5), Promoting Work-Based Learning (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 1) and Supporting School Cooperation in the Danube Region (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 4). PACs have also set several initiatives for project development. For example, the planned project on "Enhanced Competitiveness & Employability through Innovative Work-Based Learning (WBL) in VET" is being developed by KulturKontakt Austria in cooperation with the Romanian TVET Centre under the umbrella of PA 9 (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 1).

A 3rd meeting of Working Group 3 "Creativity and Entrepreneurship" was held in Bucharest on 18 May 2015. The Working Group consists of participants from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, the Republic of Moldova and Romania. Innovacentrum, an organisation from the Technical University of Prague, recently joined the Working Group. The meeting also informed the participants about the START funded project "Danube Competence Centres for Creativity and Entrepreneurship" led by the Business Support Centre for SME in Ruse (see Chapter 2.2 Work Area 3).

Another important topic in the framework of PA9 is the promotion of green competences. Based on a proposal by the Romanian Ministry of National Education and the National Centre for TVET an experts group on green competences was established during the 8th Steering Group Meeting of PA9

in Vienna on 5th November 2015. The experts group is i.a. working on the elaboration of a joint application for a TVET international project in the field of green competences for Ecotourism in the Danube Region. For this reason an International Conference on "Green Competences on Ecotourism in the Danube Region" took place in Comana on 8th June 2015 followed by the first meeting of the experts group in Bucharest on 9th June 2015. The conference assembled representatives from ministries, VET providers, companies in the field of Ecotourism, tourism associations and other relevant institutions from the Danube Region. Both meeting enabled to set links with Priority Area 3 "Culture and Tourism" and Priority Area 6 "Biodiversity, landscapes, quality of air and soils".

Related to the publicity measures of PA9, the website www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu has proven to be an important and vital instrument to inform relevant stakeholders about on-going and implemented activities, projects and initiatives. For this reason, the website has been continuously updated. Due to technical issues (e.g. no technical support, access issues etc.) and to ensure access to information for stakeholders, the website has been re-launched in February 2015. The page also contributes to raise public awareness on the Strategy. In order to support the coordination and communication, electronic PA9 newsletters are additionally distributed among relevant stakeholders. Moreover, in the current reporting period an updated EUSDR PA9 Project Folder was developed, providing an overview of on-going and selected finished projects as well as some project ideas for which PA9 of the EUSDR serves as a common umbrella.

In addition to that, countries of the Danube Region are beginning to provide space on websites to inform interested stakeholder about on-going activities of EUSDR and in particular of PA9. For instance, the MoE of the Czech Republic is providing information on the EUSDR and in particular PA9 on its own website (<http://www.msmt.cz/mezinarodni-vztahy/makroregionalni-strategie-eu>).

Next steps:

- 10th Steering Group Meeting in Autumn 2015 (tbc)
- 11th Steering Group Meeting in Spring 2016 (tbc)
- Strategic Planning Conference of PA9 in Spring 2016 (tbc)
- 4th Annual Forum on 29-30 October 2015 in Ulm (Germany)

4. FUNDING

The budget period 2014-2020 sets new impulses and provides the framework to make the Strategy a success on all levels of intervention. As a consequence, the alignment of policy and funding towards the objectives of the Strategy, and in particular of PA9 remains vital. So far, existing programmes at local, regional, national and Community level mostly differ in terms of their regional focus or refer to the different legal situations of the DR countries (e.g. Member States, non-EU member states). This occasionally leads to challenges for innovative partnerships as it creates barriers for joint actions. For instance, in order to implement PA9 projects within Erasmus+, the inclusion of some third countries remains challenging. Thus the financing of certain projects remains a main obstacle in the implementation of PA9, also in the new budget period 2014-2020 and its legislative framework.

Nevertheless, the Erasmus+ programme remains an important funding instrument for EUSDR projects, as it provides a strong transnational element and supports European cooperation in the field of education and training, including strategies in the field of regional policy. However, it seems that EUSDR-related proposals often do not receive funding due to a very competitive procedure. The simple fact that a project proposal is based on or refers to the EUSDR cannot bring additional points in evaluation. Therefore, in order to achieve a more substantial impact on the Danube Region, it would be necessary to be considered assigning some additional points to proposals based on EU macro-regional strategies or to publish selected more targeted calls.

Furthermore, countries of the Danube Region have the possibility to use the potential of ESI funds, the pre-accession and neighbourhood instruments in non-EU countries, but also all other available sources of EU and national funding in order to support reforms in education and training as well as labour market systems. Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty or investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and life-long learning are thematic objectives to which the ESF can make a major contribution on national level. In order to implement PA9 projects through the ESF, its transnational element would need to be strengthened. The ERDF on the other hand allows countries to implement also projects with a strong cross-border and transnational element.

Integrating the area of education and training as well as labour market as a social dimension in the upcoming ETC DANUBE Transnational Programme 2014-2020 through several interventions by EUSDR PAC 9 was an important achievement and also contributes towards more visibility of PA9 activities. It is hoped, that the programme will contribute to a bigger strategic and macro-regional impact of PA9-related actions and projects. The cooperation programme addresses five priority axes of which Priority Axis 1 "Innovative and socially responsible Danube Region" deals with topics of PA9. It is divided into two specific objectives (SO), namely SO 1.1 "Improve framework conditions" and SO 1.2 "Increase competences for business and social innovation" of which the latter is related to activities of PA9 as it deals with i.a. fostering innovative learning systems to increase competences of employees and strengthening entrepreneurial culture and learning. In addition, SO 4.1 "Increase institutional capacities to tackle major societal challenges" of Priority Axis 4 "Well governed Danube Region" is also of interest to PA9. Finally, Priority Axis 5 is responsible for the "Technical Assistance" which will support PACs in their efforts for the efficient and smooth implementation of the cooperation programme.

PACs continued their efforts in setting links between the OP and the activities of PA9 and contributed to the development of "Evaluation criteria for EUSDR relevant projects" that should support the Joint Secretary (JS) of the DTP to assess project proposals with a view to their relevance for EUSDR.

Another potential funding source for transnational EUSDR projects represents the Central Europe Programme 2014-2020 (CE) in the framework of the European Territorial Cooperation objective and financed by the ERDF. The overall goal of the programme is to boost the cooperation beyond borders in Central Europe in order to make cities and regions better places to live and work. The

programme is based on four priority axes (Innovation, Low-Carbon Strategies, Natural and Cultural Resources and Transport) of which axis 1 is most relevant to the topic of PA9. Priority 1 is divided into two specific objectives of which one is related to "Improve skills and entrepreneurial competences for advancing economic and social innovation in Central European Regions". The objective is i.a. to introduce innovative learning systems considering demographic change. PA9 participated at the National Info Day for the first call for project proposals held in Vienna on 4th March 2015 and informed interested stakeholders through the PA9 website.

The question of funding of the cooperation structure of the Priority Area remains a challenge when it comes to the coordination of the Strategy. The Technical Assistance (TA) which was granted by the Commission to the PACs starting in 2012 has proven to be very supportive regarding funding of the coordination, networking and project development activities. The technical assistance supports i.a. the facilitation of Steering Group Meetings, Working Group Meetings and Stakeholder Conferences, and in particular supports the participation of Non-EU member states at these events through covering travel and accommodation costs. In order to enhance sustainability of the achieved results so far, PACs and the EC agreed on a no-cost extension of the initial TA until end of July 2015. In addition, a new call of interest for Technical Assistance support (2015-2016) to PAC activities was published on the EUSDR website on 10th July 2015 which will be administered by the DSP. Beyond that, it will be essential to develop a sustainable, simple and reliable funding mechanism the upcoming DANUBE Transnational Programme 2014-2020 from 2016 onwards that facilitates and supports the activities of the Priority Area Coordinators.

As highlighted above, the development of high quality projects in a transnational, macro-regional environment is a challenging venture with very specific needs, especially in the thematic areas of PA9. The Technical Assistance Facility for Danube Region Projects (TAF-DRP) established by the Commission is seen as an important instrument for the preparation of strategically important projects with a clear EUSDR added-value. For this reason PACs assisted and supported the submission of project ideas by the SG members regarding both 1st and 2nd calls of the TAF-DRP. For the second call which was launched in May 2015, PA9 restricted its thematic focus in order to encourage project applications supporting equal opportunities in learning and active global citizenship and which contribute to the social inclusion of individuals from minorities and vulnerable groups (e.g. Roma).

The pilot initiative "START – Danube Region Project Fund", launched and coordinated by the City of Vienna, is a welcome development, as PA9 has continuously addressed the need for financing of smaller transnational projects. The aim of the programme is to provide support in the form of seed money helping organisations and institutions to initiate and to implement projects with relevance for the Danube Region. The first call of START was launched in 2014. 127 projects were submitted to Priority Area 9 of which 93 eligible projects were subject of a review by the Priority Area Coordinators with the involvement of the SG. Three PA9 project applications were granted for START funding, dealing with the establishment of a centres for creativity and entrepreneurship (DANUBE ENTRE), the development of life-long learning programs (MILD) and the establishment of a Social Service and Education Cluster (DSSEC) (see Chapter 2.2). In May 2015, for the second call of START, PA9 focussed its thematic area as in case of the TAF-DRP (see above).

Annex 1: Work Plan of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR

Annex 2: Conclusions of the 3rd Stakeholder Conference

Annex 3: Minutes of the 8th Meeting of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR

Annex 4: Minutes of the 9th Meeting of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR

Annex 5: EUSDR PA9 Project Folder