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ReSPA Self-Evaluation of Merit Recruitment in the Western Balkans: 2023 Update



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for
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The Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA) is an inter-governmental organisation for enhancing regional cooperation, promoting shared learning and supporting the development of public administration in the Western Balkans. As such, it helps governments in the region develop better public administration, public services, and overall governance systems for their citizens and businesses, and it helps prepare them for membership and integration into the European Union (EU). The ReSPA members are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, while Kosovo* is a beneficiary

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¹ * This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of independence.

Contents



1. Introduction	4
2. Methodological Approach	6
2.1. Update of the Methodological Framework	6
2.2. Assumptions of the Methodological Framework	7
2.3. Evaluating Change in the Area of Merit Recruitment since 2021: Between Stability and Incremental Progress	8
2.3.1. Stability Overall	8
2.3.2. Incremental Progress in Selected Areas of Merit Recruitment	9
1) Outreach Activities and Support for Applicants	9
2) Digitalisation of Recruitment	10
3) Professionalisation of Selection Commissions	10
2.3.3. Persisting Challenges of Merit Recruitment	11
1) Not all institutions apply merit recruitment	11
2) (Some) Top managers remain outside the scope of merit recruitment	11
3) (In some cases) Temporary staff remain outside the scope of merit recruitment	11
4) Effectiveness and consistency of examinations	12
5) Still no onboarding and limited induction training	12
2.3.4. Trajectories of ReSPA Members	13
1) Albania	13
2) Bosnia and Herzegovina	13
3) Montenegro	14
4) North Macedonia	14
5) Serbia	14
3. Recommendations	15
Appendix 1: 2023 ReSPA Self-Evaluation Framework for Merit Recruitment in the Western Balkans	16
1. Scope for Merit Recruitment Across Institutions and Categories of Staff	16
2. Requirements for the Opening of Positions	16
3. Public Advertisement of Vacancies	17
4. Selection by Commissions	18
5. Selection by Examination	19
6. Onboarding and Induction	20

1. Introduction



This report presents an update of the ReSPA self-evaluation of merit recruitment in the Western Balkans. It includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This marks the third occasion ReSPA has supported its members to review merit recruitment procedures and practices, identify areas for improvement and explore opportunities for learning from good practices in the region. Following the development of the self-evaluation framework in 2020 and the initial baseline study, the evaluation was updated for the first time at the end of 2021. The current report thus focuses on changes that occurred during the last two years.

Merit recruitment refers to the recruitment and selection of the best-qualified candidate for a given job or career. It is the hallmark of modern professional civil services and is widely practised across EU member states and the OECD world. The benefits of merit recruitment have been extensively studied. Merit recruitment is associated with economic growth, government performance and less corruption in public administration. In particular, many proximate benefits of merit recruitment include positive effects on job satisfaction and well-being of public servants, public service motivation, ethical behaviour, organisational commitment and staff retention in public administration.

Accordingly, merit recruitment is a key element of SIGMA's Principles of Public Administration. It reflects the importance of establishing and implementing standards and procedures that enable merit recruitment practices in public administration as a critical condition for EU accession. SIGMA lists merit recruitment explicitly as Principle 9: 'Public administration attracts and recruits competent people based on merit and equal opportunities' within the wider area of Public Service and Human Resources Management.

ReSPA has supported the professionalisation of civil services in the Western Balkans for over a decade. Merit recruitment has been a cornerstone of ReSPA activities during this period. Working group meetings, working visits, workshops, conferences, surveys and direct ReSPA support mechanisms allow ReSPA Members to learn from each other to improve civil service management practices.

ReSPA self-evaluations, formerly self-assessments, have become a key mechanism of learning and support in the region. They assist ReSPA Members to improve merit recruitment practices by critically reflecting on their own frameworks and practices in light of international and regional good practices and engaging in exchange and dialogue to learn from each other. Regional workshops and meetings accompany self-evaluations, allowing for deliberation and lesson-drawing among ReSPA Members. Self-evaluations thus differ from external assessments, such as regular SIGMA monitoring and assessment exercises conducted in the EU accession process.

Against this background, this report presents the results of the 2023 self-evaluation of merit recruitment in the Western Balkans. It is divided into five parts.

The first part outlines the **methodological approach and assumptions** underlying the self-evaluation framework, which consists of six areas of merit recruitment and 23 conditions that support effective merit recruitment practices.

- 1) The framework has been updated and extended. In particular, the area of onboarding and induction was added as the final stage of the recruitment journey.
- 2) The framework further attaches greater emphasis to outreach issues to increase the attractiveness of civil service employment and guidance for applicants to support them during the application and examination process.
- 3) The self-evaluation retains a broad scope by including all central institutions of the administrations and all categories of employees regardless of the scope of the civil service law in accordance with the new SIGMA Principles of Administration.

The second part discusses **three main findings of the 2023 update**.

- 1) It shows that overall stability has prevailed in merit recruitment since the update of the self-evaluation in 2021. However, larger-scale civil service reforms are planned by North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina at the level of *Republika Srpska*.
- 2) Incremental progress is evident in selected areas of recruitment. Investment in outreach activities and guidance for applicants, further digitalisation of recruitment and efforts to professionalise selection commissions stand out for some ReSPA Members, particularly Serbia and Albania.
- 3) The effectiveness of merit recruitment continues to be hampered by the persistence of key challenges, such as exempting some institutions and categories of staff from merit recruitment, the effectiveness and consistency of examination systems, and the lack of attention to onboarding and induction training.

The second part closes with short overviews of the main features that ReSPA Members face in merit recruitment. They identify the extent to which conditions for effective merit recruitment are in place and which challenges remain to be addressed.

The third part presents five **recommendations** for ReSPA and ReSPA Members.

- 1) Action Points for each area of merit recruitment are included in detailed tables for each ReSPA Member.
- 2) ReSPA should strengthen its support of peer-to-peer learning through bilateral exchanges, workshops and working group meetings to support the diffusion of good practices by some ReSPA Members across the region.
- 3) ReSPA should consider dedicated efforts to support induction training and onboarding initiatives in the region.
- 4) ReSPA should make efforts to address persistent challenges for effective merit recruitment, such as the de-politicisation of senior civil service management and the effectiveness of examinations through study visits to EU member states and workshops tailored to ReSPA Members.
- 5) ReSPA should consider updating the self-evaluations of merit recruitment in approximately three years to allow time for the adoption and implementation of Action Points and the planned reforms by ReSPA Members.

The fourth part consists of the **Appendix** which provides a detailed update of the self-evaluation framework, including an explanation for each of the 23 conditions for merit recruitment.

2. Methodological Approach



The ReSPA self-evaluation of merit recruitment was conducted for the first time in 2020. At that time, a framework for evaluation was developed based on the experience of reforms and practices in the Western Balkan, the insights from scientific research, and international good practices. Moreover, the evaluation framework sought to accommodate the SIGMA Principles of Public Administration, which have historically given particular weight to the principle of merit recruitment.

2.1. Update of the Methodological Framework

The 2023 framework presents an update and extension of the 2020 framework. It differs from the original framework in four ways. First, the label of the instrument was changed from self-assessment to self-evaluation. The change reflects the attempt to differentiate SIGMA's regular 'assessments' in the context of EU accession from ReSPA activities in the region.

Second, the 2023 framework extends the self-evaluations from five areas of merit recruitment to six areas by adding the area of onboarding and induction. The six areas, therefore, are:

- 1) The scope for applying merit recruitment across institutions and categories of staff.
- 2) The conditions for opening positions for external recruitment, including requirements for the systematisation of positions and staff planning.
- 3) The recruitment of staff by means of public advertisements and thus open competition.
- 4) The formation and selection of candidates by multi-member commissions.
- 5) The assessment of candidates by means of written and oral examinations.
- 6) Onboarding policies and requirements for induction training.

The six areas of merit recruitment can be considered a journey that ranges from opening positions to their advertisement, the assessment of candidates, their selection, and subsequent integration into the civil service. The area of 'onboarding and induction' was added to consider that it plays a critical role in the socialisation of new recruits into the public service, and they are naturally the last stage of the recruitment process.

Moreover, the publication of SIGMA's new Principles of Public Administration in 2023 included an indicator of the onboarding of new recruits. The ReSPA self-evaluation aims to be compatible with SIGMA Principles and help ReSPA Members prepare for the next SIGMA assessment scheduled for 2024.

Third, the 2023 framework reviewed the components of each area of merit recruitment. Originally, the framework consisted of five areas and 21 lessons or conditions for the effective implementation of merit recruitment. The revised framework consists of 23 conditions. Two conditions were added as part of the area of onboarding and induction. At the same time, the first area on the scope for applying merit recruitment procedures was streamlined from four to three conditions.

Critically, the 2023 framework pays more attention to so-called outreach activities that aim to enhance the attractiveness of public service employment and provide guidelines to support applicants during the application and examination process. Both amendments consider their growing importance in the context of changing labour markets and demographic changes in the region. In the new framework, they are treated as separate conditions for the evaluation and reflection in the area of 'recruitment by public advertisements'. They are treated as two of six conditions that help make public advertisements work more effectively to reach a wider pool of potential applicants and lower entry barriers by making the application process more user-friendly and less costly.

The same logic of identifying conditions that make the implementation of the merit recruitment principle work better applies to the other recruitment areas. For example, the effectiveness of formal assessments is enhanced (1) if both written and oral examinations are required, (2) if they are based on clear frameworks such as competency frameworks that facilitate consistent application and help generate relevant information about candidates, (3) if the winner of the competition is automatically selected for a given position or career, and (4) if examinations and their outcomes are open to external scrutiny and appeal.

To put it another way, for the effective implementation of the principle of merit recruitment, it is not sufficient to simply use examinations or to publicly advertise vacancies. Rather, it is essential to meet additional conditions and build an infrastructure that makes implementing merit recruitment procedures effective. The framework can, therefore, be used as an extended list to check and reflect upon merit recruitment procedures, practices, and conditions in a given ReSPA Member context.

Appendix 1 provides an updated list of the 23 conditions of the self-evaluation framework. The appendix further explains each condition's background and how to observe it in practice. The framework was again presented and discussed at the ReSPA Workshop on Talent Management, Merit Recruitment, and Performance Appraisal in Belgrade on 30 November – 1 December 2023.

The fourth difference between the new 2023 framework and its predecessors concerns the rating of merit recruitment procedures and supporting practices. In contrast to 2020 and 2021, the current ReSPA self-evaluation does not provide ratings but seeks to stress the *developmental* character of the initiative. ReSPA Members are invited to reflect on the conditions and how they apply to their context.

2.2. Assumptions of the Methodological Framework

Four assumptions regarding the self-evaluation framework require further elaboration.

- 1) This ReSPA self-evaluation focuses on the 'central institutions of the administrations' understood here as institutions within the scope of the executive of the central government. It means that the self-evaluation excludes the local/municipal and regional (if applicable) administration, the administration of parliament, the presidency, courts, and institutions accountable to parliament rather than the government. This approach also means that the point of reference is **not** the scope of the civil service law but the central institutions of the administrations.

This being said, the self-evaluation naturally provides more detailed information concerning institutions governed by civil service law, as the members of central HR bodies who completed the evaluation mostly focus on the recruitment of civil servants rather than other categories of employees. The same approach was already taken for the ReSPA self-evaluation in 2020 and 2021. With the publication of the new Principles in 2023, SIGMA has also pivoted towards assessing public service as a whole rather than understanding civil service narrowly.

- 2) The self-evaluation includes all categories of employees except ministers as members of the government, senior political appointees such as State Secretaries or Deputy Ministers and political advisors. It thus ranges from the most senior civil servants (e.g., Secretaries General) to the lowest level of public servants and staff appointed on temporary contracts. The self-evaluation thus seeks an understanding of the central institutions of the administrations as a whole and not merely the selection of staff appointed as civil servants for (usually) indefinite terms.

The framework's first area of merit recruitment especially addresses the challenge of extending merit recruitment procedures to as many institutions of the central administration and as many categories of employees as possible.

- 3) The self-evaluation framework focuses on the 'external recruitment' into the public service. This is not to say that the standards and rules governing internal recruitment are not important. Rather, it assumes that merit recruitment requires, at a minimum, that civil servants and employees have passed through a professional merit filter at the point of entering public administration. This implies that subsequent transfers and promotions could be conducted on the basis of less rigorous assessment criteria, as the candidate has been checked at least once before at the point of entry.²
- 4) The ReSPA self-evaluation of merit recruitment is what it says: it is an evaluation conducted by the members of the ReSPA Regional Thematic Group for Human Resources Management and Professional Development. The members of the groups are typically senior civil servants of central HR bodies such as civil service agencies, ministries of public administration, academies/schools or departments in charge of training and other key ministries with responsibility for human resources management.

² Certainly, it should be a matter of further debate to what extent the promotion to lower, middle and top management positions requires further testing. If external recruitment at non-managerial entry level has been subject to extensive testing, internal candidates for management positions have been at least assessed once during their career. However, there are of course also strong reasons to require further (management-specific) testing for internal advancement to the management level.

The framework was prepared back in 2020. It was revised, updated and extended for the 2023 Update. Working Group members then prepared a draft self-evaluation based on the application of the framework to their context. The drafts were followed up during video calls, and the results and information were integrated into the self-evaluation documents. The advanced drafts of the self-evaluations were then presented and discussed at the ReSPA Workshop on Talent Management, Merit Recruitment and Performance Appraisal on 30 November – 1 December 2023 in Belgrade.

After the workshop, the self-evaluations were finalised. They have been collected in detailed tables that present the state of play, changes since 2021, and Action Points for each ReSPA Member. The Action Points represent recommendations that ReSPA Members might want to take forward in light of the status of a given condition for effective merit recruitment.

With this in mind, the next part provides a summary of the findings of the 2023 self-evaluations and the extent to which change has occurred since 2021.

2.3. Evaluating Change in the Area of Merit Recruitment since 2021: Between Stability and Incremental Progress

Two years may be a short time to expect major changes in civil service management, including merit recruitment and selection. However, it helps identify trends and allows for an evaluation of the state of play in 2023. Three conclusions can be drawn from this ReSPA self-evaluation. First, stability in structures and practices is the most evident feature of the last two years of merit recruitment in the Western Balkans. Second, incremental progress in selected areas of merit recruitment and by some ReSPA Members can be identified. Third, several challenges and, indeed, obstacles to effective merit recruitment have persisted across the region.

2.3.1. Stability Overall

Overall, merit recruitment in the Western Balkans since 2021 presents a picture of stability and little change. None of the ReSPA Members engaged in major civil service reforms. None of the ReSPA Members replaced or adopted new civil service laws, and none of them introduced major initiatives to reform parts of the recruitment procedure. At the same time, none of the ReSPA Members experienced a negative change in the sense that the conditions for the implementation of merit recruitment deteriorated.

Looking more closely at the evidence of change, the modal answer to the conditions that make up the self-evaluation framework was 'no change since 2021' for the ReSPA Members. Discounting the area of onboarding and induction, which has been evaluated for the first time, 147 conditions could have been subject to change. Notwithstanding a distinction between minor and major change, more than 80 per cent of the conditions are classified as a 'no change' response.

This being said, the rate of change varies across the region. In **Serbia** and **Albania**, more changes could be observed than for the other ReSPA Members. In both cases, changes indicate progress in the quality of merit recruitment. Details will be discussed below.

This finding of overall stability should not be overly surprising. All ReSPA Members have civil service laws in place. As part of these laws, they have established the basic conditions for merit recruitment practices. The focus of reform is thus naturally on improving an existing system by means of incremental steps rather than initiating transformative changes.

Moreover, public administration reforms, including civil service reform, move through cycles of increased reform activities followed by efforts to put new regulations into practice and improve their implementation.

Looking at the horizon, the revision of civil service laws and their equivalent has been on the agenda of several ReSPA administrations. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the level of *Republika Srpska* has prepared a new Civil Service Law that is ready for government approval and consultation. The revision of the law on the civil service has been on the table for the Institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina for several years. The Ministry of Information Society and Administration in **North Macedonia** is working on the revision of the Law on Administrative Servants and expects to submit it to the government for consideration after the parliamentary election to be held in 2024.

The Ministry of Information Society and Administration in **North Macedonia** has also prepared a draft Law on Top Managers that is planned to enter the legislative process after the parliamentary election. **Montenegro** is also planning to revise its Law on Civil Service significantly.

The plans to adopt new civil service laws or significantly upgrade them are not entirely new initiatives for these ReSPA Members. They indicate that civil service reforms have been slow-moving, with a constant tension between stagnation, incremental change and periodical step changes. This brings us to the next section on incremental progress in merit recruitment.

2.3.2. Incremental Progress in Selected Areas of Merit Recruitment

Incremental progress has been evident in selected areas of merit recruitment, but it has been uneven across the region. Three areas of incremental progress stand out for the last two years.

1) Outreach Activities and Support for Applicants

Progress has been most evident in the area of recruitment by public advertisement, most notably in relation to the development of outreach activities and initiatives to enhance the attractiveness of civil service employment. These activities have gone hand-in-hand with the development of guidelines and resources to support applicants during the application and assessment process. Applicants are key stakeholders of the recruitment and selection process, and activities in these areas have aimed to improve their experience of the application and examination process.

Changes have been most evident in Serbia and Albania. To improve the attractiveness of civil service employment and the experience of applicants, the Human Resources Management Service of **Serbia** invested in a communication strategy that includes social media and online activities, collaborations with universities, and establishing an internship programme as a stepping stone into public service.

The communication strategy includes a daily schedule for a Viber Community that grew its membership from around 800 in 2020 to nearly 3,000 in 2023 and offers information about job openings, career development, guidance for examinations and Q&A sessions. The Human Resources Management Service further created YouTube videos to support applicants, proactively used social media to maximise outreach (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram), and set up a dedicated Candidate's Corner on a website to help candidates prepare for exams and interviews.

The outreach activities have been complemented by a Centre for Career Development that covers the analysis and identification of potential future managers, career counselling services to help them develop their career interests and opportunities, a 360 Degree Feedback Assessment platform to enable personal and professional growth and a coaching programme to empower them and provide support during the journey of change. Career development offerings together with the internship programme administered by the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, aim to increase the number and quality of applicants and make civil service employment attractive for young graduates.

In **Albania**, similarly, social media activities by the Department of Public Administration and collaborations with universities to boost the number and quality of applicants have been complemented by a programme for excellent graduates and a new internship programme to attract young people into the civil service. In both cases, recruitment and selection are administered by the Department of Public Administration and merit standards are upheld insofar as positions are publicly advertised, and applicants are ranked according to their educational attainment. They are employed for one year and have to go through the standard merit recruitment procedure to qualify for permanent employment in the civil service.

Other ReSPA Members have also made efforts to provide guidance for applicants. The Civil Service Agency of **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, for example, provides a manual for applicants called 'Stop Mistakes', which has led to a decrease in the number of rejections on the grounds that applications were incomplete or ineligible. Similarly, the Civil Service Agency of the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* offers a list of Frequently Asked Questions to help applicants prepare the application and assessment.

In **Montenegro**, the Human Resources Management Authority, during the COVID-19 pandemic, developed and offered a help desk for applicants. This practice has since been continued to provide assistance for applicants before and during the recruitment and assessment process.

Outreach activities and guidance for applicants stand out insofar as they can be developed by central HR bodies without major legal changes and often without the need for major funds. Most of the outreach activities that were developed by the Human Resources Management Service in Serbia were initiated and seen through by existing staff and without additional resources. Similarly, the excellent graduate scheme and the internship programme in Albania initially relied on the regulation of the Council of Ministers and could be managed by an existing unit within the Department of Public Administration without the need for a change of the Civil Service Law.

2) Digitalisation of Recruitment

The trend towards the digitalisation of recruitment in the region has continued and presents a second area of incremental progress. Most notably, the Civil Service Agency of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** introduced an e-recruitment platform that allows applicants to set up a profile and apply online. This has been a major change in civil service recruitment to the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Civil Service Agency of the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* has also set up an online platform (*e-konkurs*) that so far provides a central place for the announcement of job vacancies in the civil service. The opportunity to apply online and to eventually link the application to the first stage of the examination procedure is underway and likely to go live in 2024.

E-recruitment systems have been in operation in **North Macedonia** and **Albania** for several years. Plans are underway to introduce them in **Montenegro, Serbia** and Bosnia and Herzegovina at the level of *Republika Srpska*. Compared to outreach activities, introducing electronic recruitment systems has been more challenging and time-consuming. They are inherently complex, tend to require regulatory change, and their establishment and maintenance are more costly. When progress occurs, it is thus inherently incremental in nature.

3) Professionalisation of Selection Commissions

The area of professionalising selection commissions is the third area in which ReSPA Members have experienced incremental progress. Eight years ago, when ReSPA published the first study on merit recruitment, it was still unusual for commission members to receive any training and guidance. By 2023, it has become a common practice across the region, albeit different in scope.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina (all levels)** **Montenegro**, and **Albania**, training for selection commission members has continued during the last two years. In the cases of **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, training is mainly provided for so-called external experts who sit on selection commissions. They may be civil servants or representatives from academia and the third sector.

Similarly, external experts receive instructions in Montenegro and Albania before serving on selection commissions. In both cases, external experts are recruited from outside the civil service following an open call.

In Serbia and North Macedonia, it is unusual to appoint external experts to selection commissions. Moreover, training of selection commission members is not compulsory. However, in **North Macedonia**, the Agency for Administration provides written guidelines. In **Serbia**, the Human Resources Management Service sits on the selection commission and instructs representatives from employing institutions prior to the start of the assessment of candidates. In addition, the National Academy of Public Administration provides training for members of HR units of employing institutions.

Similar to outreach activities and support for applicants, it is evident that guidance and training for commission members is less dependent on regulatory changes and the provision of budgetary resources. In fact, much of the progress in the region during the last few years is the result of initiatives taken by staff of central HR bodies.

In sum, incremental progress is evident across several areas of merit recruitment. Notably, most of these changes have been possible without major reforms and the change of formal-legal frameworks. This development is a testament to the commitment of the staff of central HR bodies. Yet it also suggests that civil service reform was not on top of the agenda and that some of the main obstacles to progress have remained unaddressed.

2.3.3. Persisting Challenges of Merit Recruitment

Despite the identification of incremental progress in several areas, the evaluation of merit recruitment in the Western Balkans often remains ambivalent. On the one hand, ReSPA members have adopted civil service laws that institutionalise merit recruitment and ensure public advertisements, selection by the commission, and the examination of candidates. Moreover, as outlined above, there are clearly signs of progress in the region.

On the other, concerns about the politicisation of civil service recruitment remain widespread. Moreover, informalism, nepotism and corruption are often raised as persisting pathologies of public administration in the region. Some of these ambiguities can be traced to malfunctions of merit recruitment that have persisted for a long time, and even if they are regularly subject to debate, they show few signs of progress. At least five such persisting challenges can be identified.

1) Not all institutions apply merit recruitment

The scope for applying merit recruitment procedures across institutions remains limited across the region. Crucially, civil service laws formalise merit recruitment, but their scope does not extend to all central institutions of the administrations. Consequently, some or many institutions remain subject to regulation by the Labour Code and, as a result, do not have to apply merit recruitment procedures. This challenge is evident across the region and is an important obstacle to merit-based personnel management in public administration.

2) (Some) Top managers remain outside the scope of merit recruitment

The scope for applying merit recruitment procedures also tends to be limited for senior civil servants, which qualifies as the second major challenge for the region. The issue has been prominent in **Serbia**, where approximately 50 per cent of the senior civil servants are employed as 'acting managers'. They are appointed for short terms and do not have to undergo merit recruitment; that is, vacancies are not advertised, there are no selection commissions and examinations are not required. Instead, they are appointed at the discretion of the (political) leadership.

Acting manager appointments have reappeared in **Montenegro** after their recruitment from outside the civil service was outlawed for some time. Acting appointments are still possible but unusual in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. Only in **Albania** the law requires the recruitment of interim managers from within the civil service for as long as the position is vacant.

North Macedonia differs insofar as State Secretaries have been integrated into the Law on Administrative Servants scope. However, they are appointed at the discretion of Ministers and merit recruitment requirements do not apply.

The de-politicisation of the senior civil service is politically highly charged. The lack of reform progress is not surprising but creates negative side effects for the broader civil service management, policy-making, and the quality of policy implementation. Extending merit recruitment to the senior civil service should be a priority for future civil service reforms.

3) (In some cases) Temporary staff remain outside the scope of merit recruitment

The scope for the application of merit recruitment procedures also remains – in most but not all cases – limited for the employment of temporary staff. In **Serbia**, for example, approximately 10 per cent of employees at the level of central institutions are employed on temporary contracts. They do not have to pass through merit recruitment procedures. The implementation of a regulation – adopted several years ago – that would introduce merit requirements such as public announcements, selection by the commission, and personal interviews has been postponed again and will only be enforced from 2025.

Similarly, non-merit-based temporary appointments are common in **North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina**, at the level of *Republika Srpska*. By contrast, in **Montenegro, Albania** and Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* level, they have been brought under the umbrella of merit recruitment. The basic solution has been the requirement to select temporary staff from the list of candidates who passed through merit recruitment but had missed out, that is, had not been selected as winners of an open competition.

Like the reform of the senior civil service, the employment of temporary staff has often been politically charged. Despite frequent attempts, reforms have rarely been forthcoming. The institutionalisation of basic merit requirements for temporary staff in Montenegro was a rare exception during the last decade. The second postponement of the new regulation to raise merit standards for temporary appointments in Serbia indicates the challenge of making significant progress in this area.

4) Effectiveness and consistency of examinations

Selection by examination is a characteristic feature of merit recruitment, but the quality of examination systems remains an important challenge for the effectiveness of merit recruitment in the region. Examinations are generally required by all ReSPA administrations. Only in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** at the level of *Republika Srpska*, a written examination at entry is not compulsory. However, the Law on Civil Service that has been prepared will fill this gap and align merit recruitment at the level of *Republika Srpska* with the rest of the region.

All other ReSPA administrations require candidates to pass through written and oral examinations. However, there are considerable differences across the region in relation to the contents and format of the examination. In 2019, **Serbia** introduced the most comprehensive examination system in the region that relies on general functional competence testing, special functional competence testing for the position that is to be filled, behavioural competence testing by means of psychological and personality tests, and finally, a personal interview to determine the winning candidate.

The examination combines multiple choice computer-based parts and simulations that test candidates' ability to analyse problems, apply legislation, prepare decisions, write briefs, etc. Therefore, the examination generates relevant information about candidates and is consistent and open to external scrutiny and appeal if required.

By contrast, most examinations in the region struggle to meet these conditions in one way or another. General examinations are often focused on knowledge testing and are too basic to meaningfully differentiate the abilities and suitability of candidates. Job-specific examinations, similarly, are designed on an *ad hoc* basis or test knowledge rather than skills. Interviews are conducted by all ReSPA Members, yet in most (but not all) cases, they are subject to inconsistencies and irregularities that undermine the reputation of the recruitment and selection process.

To be sure, the nature of the examination challenge varies across the region. In **Albania**, written and oral examinations are fair and consistent at the point of selecting entry-level executive staff. Yet the examinations primarily test knowledge with less attention to testing problem-solving and analytical skills. Similarly, at the level of the Institutions of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and the level of the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, job-specific examinations are often considered to be ineffective because they test merely (legal) knowledge. In **North Macedonia**, job-specific and behavioural competencies are solely assessed by the interview part, but guidelines for interviews are not consistently applied.

The introduction of competency-based interviews for the Institutions of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** level several years ago signalled an important step towards raising the effectiveness and consistency of the interview part of examinations. The approach has, in part, thanks to ReSPA activities, travelled across the region and has become part of the reform initiatives in **North Macedonia**, **Montenegro** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina** at the level of *Republika Srpska*. Yet the reform progress in the area of examinations has generally been slow-moving.

5) Still no onboarding and limited induction training

For the 2023 self-evaluation of merit recruitment, the area of onboarding and induction has been added. They naturally form the last step of the recruitment journey, after which a candidate becomes a permanent public servant. As this is a new area for evaluation, it is not meaningful to evaluate change over time. However, the 2023 self-evaluation provides a baseline for future work.

Interestingly, onboarding policies are largely unused in the region. The default approach relies on employing institutions where heads of institutions or heads of units do what they think they should do to induct new recruits into the civil service and their organisation. By contrast, central HR bodies have not yet prepared guidelines for onboarding that could guide employing institutions and provide material for their use.

On the other hand, induction training is required in administrations such as **Albania**, where the Albanian School of Public Administration provides compulsory training for new recruits. Similarly, the level of Institu-

tions of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* require induction training offered by the Civil Service Agencies. In **Serbia**, induction training is not compulsory, but employing institutions may decide to send new recruits to the National Academy of Public Administration. By contrast, induction training is neither required nor practised in **Montenegro**, **North Macedonia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina** at the level of *Republika Srpska*.

Onboarding policies are an effective tool for socialising new recruits into the organisation. They have been shown by research to increase job engagement, work motivation and organisational commitment – to name but a few key benefits. At the same time, they can be developed on the initiative of central HR bodies and do not necessarily require major regulatory change and political backing. Induction training, by contrast, requires, most likely, regulatory change and, crucially, the establishment of a training institution and staff that can deliver the training. The barriers to change are thus steeper than for the adoption of onboarding policies.

In sum, progress in merit recruitment continues to be hampered by key challenges such as keeping institutions outside the scope of the civil service law, politicising senior civil service appointments and temporary appointments, and operating examination systems that are complex yet ineffective. The area of onboarding and induction appears to have received less attention in the past. Like the areas of outreach activities and guidance for applicants discussed above, an upgrade could make an important contribution to the effectiveness of merit recruitment in the Western Balkans and may be less difficult to realise than the reform of the examination system and the senior civil service.

2.3.4. Trajectories of ReSPA Members

The establishment of merit recruitment procedures by ReSPA Members dates back to the early and mid-2000s when civil service reforms were passed for the first time, often with the support of SIGMA and EU-funded initiatives. Since then, merit recruitment standards and procedures have been continuously changed and improved, albeit at different speeds, to different degrees and in particular, in different ways. Moreover, the conditions for the effective implementation of merit recruitment as per the ReSPA self-evaluation framework vary across the region.

1) Albania

The legislation and infrastructure in Albania meet the conditions for the effective implementation of merit recruitment to the largest extent in the region. The current approach to merit recruitment goes back to the 2013 reform of the civil service that introduced a system of 'pool recruitment'. In particular, it involves a centralised system of e-recruitment and examinations that allow for a wide reach of advertisements, an efficient and user-friendly application process and a relatively consistent and effective written and oral examination of candidates that largely eliminates opportunities for personal and political interference with selection decisions. The Department of Public Administration has also invested considerably in outreach activities to increase the attractiveness of civil service employment and provides plenty of guidance for applicants.

The main challenge remains the persistence and, indeed, the establishment of institutions outside the scope of civil service law. These institutions do not have to apply the merit standards for entry to the civil service, thereby diminishing the scope for merit recruitment in Albania.

2) Bosnia and Herzegovina

Merit recruitment in Bosnia and Herzegovina goes back to the adoption of Civil Service Laws in the early 2000s. Reforms have since been incremental, with merit recruitment by the Institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* and *Republika Srpska* sharing common features but differing in important respects.

At the level of the Institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a system of e-recruitment has recently been introduced. The Civil Service Agency also pioneered the use of social media channels to disseminate job announcements. Written and oral examinations are required for entry into the civil service. The introduction of competency-based interviews by the Civil Service Agencies a few years ago marked an innovation for the region that has since inspired others. However, the written examination elements are frequently criticised for their inability to test the competencies of candidates effectively.

The *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* operates a similar system of general and job-specific written exam-

inations followed by personal interviews. E-recruitment is about to be introduced by the Civil Service Agency. The main gap in merit recruitment concerns the final selection of candidates. Instead of selecting the examination winner, Ministers and Heads of Institutions select from an alphabetically sorted list of (potentially many) candidates who passed the examination. The merit principle is thus significantly diminished.

In *Republika Srpska*, the Civil Service Agency also centrally coordinates recruitment and selection into the civil service. For the time being, candidates have to pass a general qualifying examination *before* they apply for a job, but they do not have to pass a written examination after applying for a job. Instead, the examination is merely based on a personal interview. E-recruitment has not yet been introduced, and outreach activities have not yet been rolled out. However, the Civil Service Agency has prepared a major reform that aims to introduce both an electronic recruitment system and a written examination element.

3) Montenegro

In Montenegro, many conditions for implementing merit recruitment are in place. The foundations of the system go back to the first civil service reform in the mid-2000s. The central Human Resources Management Authority coordinates the recruitment and examination of civil servants. There is no e-recruitment yet. The examination consists of a general and job-specific written element and a personal interview.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Human Resources Management Authority started to provide more guidance for applicants. Outreach activities to raise the attractiveness of civil service employment have not yet been introduced. Moreover, several institutions remain outside the scope of the civil service law and thus do not require the application of standard merit recruitment procedures. The appointment of acting managers was regularised by ensuring basic merit standards. Recent changes have lifted these requirements, making the acting managers again exempt from the need for merit recruitment.

4) North Macedonia

North Macedonia's system of merit recruitment meets many conditions for effective implementation. Merit recruitment was established as part of the first civil service reform around the year 2000. The procedure has been adapted several times since. Recruitment and examination are centrally administered by the Agency of Administration. North Macedonia was the first ReSPA Member in the region to introduce an e-recruitment system and thus enhance the efficiency and user-friendliness of the application process.

The examination consists of a general written element and language testing followed by a personal interview. Compared to other ReSPA Members, testing requirements are thus lighter and less able to screen candidates' competencies. Moreover, State Secretaries at the top of the civil service do not have to undergo merit-based recruitment. In North Macedonia, several institutions also remain outside the scope of the civil service law, thereby diminishing the scope for applying merit recruitment.

5) Serbia

In Serbia, merit recruitment was also introduced in the mid-2000s as part of the first major civil service reform. The central Human Resources Management Service administers recruitment and examinations. The examination system introduced in the late 2010s has become the most comprehensive examination in the region. It is competency-based and includes general testing, job-specific written simulations, psychological testing and a personal interview to determine the final selection of candidates.

The Serbian Human Resources Management Services has been particularly active in the area of outreach to raise the attractiveness of civil service employment. They have also introduced exemplary guidance for applicants and candidates to support them during recruitment and examination. However, the Serbian civil service does not have a system of e-recruitment. Moreover, excluding public agencies, temporary staff and acting managers from merit requirements diminishes the scope for applying merit recruitment into Serbia's administration.

3. Recommendations



The report closes with five recommendations for further action.

- 1) Specific action points have been included for each ReSPA Member in the self-evaluation tables which were shared with each ReSPA Member. The tables cover the status quo for each area of recruitment and the conditions for effective merit recruitment practices. They further identify the changes that have occurred since 2021 and list specific appropriate Action Points. The Action Points act as recommendations for the ReSPA Members for future reform.
- 2) ReSPA should encourage peer-to-peer learning through bilateral exchange, workshops and working group meetings among ReSPA Members for areas of recruitment that have undergone positive change in some administrations but have not yet been adopted in others. In particular, good practices in outreach activities and guidance for applicants lend themselves to ReSPA's on-demand mechanisms.
- 3) ReSPA should consider onboarding and induction training separately, as it has received little attention in the region. ReSPA could invite the presentation of good practices from OECD and EU members to support ReSPA Members in developing this area of recruitment.
- 4) ReSPA should make efforts to address the 'wicked issues' such as the de-politicisation of senior civil service management and the effectiveness of examination systems by means of online conversations, study visits to OECD and EU member states, and workshops for individual ReSPA Members to prepare proposals that are both comprehensive and tailored international good practices to the context in question.
- 5) ReSPA should continue to support self-evaluations of merit recruitment combined with workshops to allow for the presentation of results, good practices and persisting challenges. Self-evaluations provide a tool for reflection and learning among ReSPA Members. They allow for the observation of changes that are expected after the adoption of new civil service laws, and after Action Points have been addressed, it is recommended to conduct the next self-evaluation in approximately three years.

Appendix 1: 2023 ReSPA Self-Evaluation Framework for Merit Recruitment in the Western Balkans

1. Scope for Merit Recruitment Across Institutions and Categories of Staff

1.1. Extension of merit recruitment to all central institutions of administrations

The lesson takes into account that 'all' institutions at the central institutions of administrations should be required to apply merit recruitment standards and procedures *regardless* of the scope of the civil service law (or equivalent). In other words, if an institution is located outside the scope of the civil service law, it should still be required to follow merit recruitment procedures.

Conversely, merit recruitment is diminished if the laws regulating personnel policy of institutions outside the scope of the civil service law, for example, labour codes and laws on public sector employees, do not require the application of merit rules and procedures such as – at the most basic level – the open advertisement of job vacancies, the formation of selection commissions, and the written and oral examination of candidates.

1.2. Extension of merit recruitment to the top management of the central institutions of administrations

This lesson takes into account that the recruitment and selection of top managers requires the application of merit rules and procedures. The top management commonly refers to the top positions in the administrative hierarchy. They are different from ministers, personal and political advisors of ministers whose tenure is linked to the tenure of ministers and, where applicable, senior political appointees such as (Political) State Secretaries and Deputy Ministers whose position is clearly regulated as a political position.

The lesson extends to acting managers who fill vacancies at top management in the interim. The assumption is that acting managers are recruited either following merit procedures or they have passed through a merit process earlier in their career in the public service. The recruitment of acting managers from inside the civil service is thus considered to be compatible with merit criteria.

1.3. Extension of merit recruitment, at least the basics, to temporary appointments and contract staff

This lesson takes into account that public servants on temporary contracts are also required to pass through merit recruitment procedures. Temporary employment as such is therefore not per se negative for merit recruitment. Instead, the non-application of (even basic) merit recruitment rules and procedures indicates a gap in the quality of merit recruitment. At a minimum, the appointment on temporary contracts should thus require basic merit standards such as public advertisement, the formation of commissions and oral and (general) written tests to provide a basic professional filter for entry to the public service.

2. Requirements for the Opening of Positions

2.1. Recruitment and employment require that positions are defined by systematisation acts (or equivalent) and approved by central institutions

This lesson takes into account that institutions should not have the discretion to create positions and open them for recruitment on an ad hoc basis. The definition of positions in systematisation acts and their approval by central HR bodies, ministries of public administration (or equivalent) and ministries of finance is thus seen as a basic mechanism to prevent the discretionary creation of jobs by institutions. The approval of systematisation acts by central HR bodies is desirable, as it elevates their role in the process of recruitment and selection.

2.2. Institutions are required to engage in staff planning and their plans are approved by central institutions

This lesson takes into account that regular staff planning reduces (but does not eliminate) opportunities for the discretionary creation and opening of positions. The approval of staff plans by central HR bodies, ministries of public administration (or equivalent) and ministries of finance, as well as their central integration into a central staffing plan, further limit discretionary hiring by institutions. Staff planning is also a standard tool to manage work programmes, workloads and demographic change.

2.3. The opening of positions requires the approval of central HR bodies

This lesson takes into account that the opening of positions for recruitment from outside the civil service requires approval by central HR bodies. It considers that in addition to regular recruitment, institutions occasionally require the ad hoc recruitment of staff, for example, to respond to sudden staff departures. The opening of positions for advertisement and recruitment should thus require central approval to eliminate opportunities for discretionary hiring.

3. Public Advertisement of Vacancies

3.1. External recruitment to permanent positions requires the prior advertisement of vacancies.

This lesson takes into account that external recruitment into the civil service requires public advertisements or announcements. It is a standard feature of merit recruitment to provide equal opportunity for every eligible citizen to apply and to maximise the pool of potential applicants. While common, it is a separate matter whether internal recruitment from within the civil service, including the internal advertisement of vacancies, should precede external recruitment. The need to advertise jobs for temporary appointments and for acting managers if recruited from outside the public service has been addressed above.

3.2. Job vacancies are advertised on central job portals of the central HR body, complemented by dissemination on other online and social media channels.

This lesson takes into account that efforts should be made to advertise job vacancies as widely as possible. Job portals managed by central HR bodies as part of e-recruitment initiatives have become the standard for good practice advertisement in the region to reach as many potential applicants as possible.

The dissemination of job advertisements via social media channels such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, Viber, etc., is desirable to reach an even larger pool of potential applicants. By contrast, public advertisement by newspapers has become less important in recent years. While newspaper announcements remain mandatory in several countries, initiatives have been launched to make this optional in the future.

3.3. Job advertisements contain relevant information to attract suitable candidates

This lesson takes into account that job advertisements should contain information that allows potential applicants to make an informed choice and to attract candidates who are suitable for the position(s) that are meant to be filled. In addition, the format of job advertisements needs to be designed in a way that attracts candidates rather than deter or confuse them.

3.4. Job advertisements should be complemented by 'outreach activities' to increase the attractiveness and branding of public service employment

This lesson takes into account that outreach activities can help increase the pool of potential applicants and, generally, the perceived attractiveness of public service employment in an increasingly competitive labour market. Outreach activities range from marketing and advertising campaigns to social media campaigns, open days, online hotlines, and collaborations with universities and colleges.

3.5. Applications can be submitted online via an electronic recruitment portal (cf. e-recruitment) that allows applicants to set up a profile and apply for one or multiple positions

This lesson takes into account that the application process should be as low-cost and user-friendly as possible to minimise barriers to entry and enhance the size of the potential pool of applicants. User-friendly, efficient application processes tend to rely on digital recruitment technologies that allow applicants to access an online portal, set up a profile, apply for one or many positions at the same time, and add documentation as required. Moreover, application fees and costs resulting from certification should be kept to a minimum to make the recruitment process as inclusive as possible. By contrast, the need for the submission of hard copies and certified documents is located at the other end of non-user-friendly approaches to recruitment.

3.6. Job advertisements are complemented by the provision of guidelines and initiatives to assist applicants before and during the application process

This lesson takes into account that material and initiatives to assist applicants before and during the recruitment process lower barriers to entry and thus have the potential to increase the pool of potential applicants. Initiatives range from handbooks and guidelines on how to apply and what to expect during the examination process to online slides, video tutorials, YouTube channels and online help desks for applicants.

4. Selection by Commissions

4.1. External recruitment requires the assessment and selection by multi-member commissions

This lesson takes into account that external recruitment into the public service requires assessment and selection by independent commissions, committees, or panels that consist of multiple members. Selection by commission reduces opportunities for discretionary hiring by managers and politicians. It also increases accountability and expertise brought to bear during the recruitment and selection process.

Commissions may consist of ad hoc and/or permanent members. Standing committees have the advantage of ensuring greater expertise and continuity but may reduce the availability of local knowledge from employing institutions. Commissions are also recommended for the hiring of temporary contract staff and, if recruited from outside the public service, interim managers.

4.2. Commissions include a representative from the central HR body

The lesson takes into account that the representation of central HR bodies on selection commissions increases the consistency, accountability, and legal compliance of their work and, thus, recruitment decisions. It also reduces the opportunities for discretionary hiring by institutions. It is further desirable that representatives of central HR bodies are full members of selection commissions rather than merely chairs or record keepers to promote the coherence of commissions' work.

At the same time, it is debatable how many members selection commissions should typically have. However, three members should be the minimum for a commission. In addition, it is debatable whether a representative of the recruiting institutions should be included in the commission. If a particular position for a particular institution is advertised, their representation may be desirable. If recruitment aims to select candidates for a career or a group of positions, representation by recruiting institutions may not be possible or relevant.

4.3. Commissions include external experts from the wider public service and outside the public service, such as academia and the third sector

This lesson takes into account that the inclusion of external experts can increase the expertise base, transparency and accountability of selection commissions and their work. However, the inclusion of external experts requires regulation, including a method for the selection of experts, their training, allocation to commissions, remuneration and tenure.

4.4. Commission members have professional competencies and receive regular training and guidance

This lesson takes into account that the professionalisation of the work of selection commissions requires investment in their skills and competencies. The provision of basic manuals and guidelines for commission members is a minimum condition for their effectiveness. Training of commission members further enhances the professional expertise and familiarity with recruitment standards and procedures, screening, and assessment techniques such as interviewing and exam design.

It is debatable whether training should be compulsory for commission members. The prior accreditation of all members may enhance the quality and consistency of the work of commissions but may not always be feasible. At a minimum, training should be compulsory for representatives of central HR bodies, HR units of employing institutions, and external experts.

5. Selection by Examination

5.1. External recruitment requires selection based on written and oral examinations.

This lesson takes into account that external recruitment always requires a basic written and oral examination of candidates. The examination is a hallmark of merit recruitment as it allows for the testing of skills, competencies, and personality traits and the subsequent identification of the best-performing candidate. For internal recruitment, it is debatable whether both written and oral examinations are required, as candidates have, presumably, already been tested at the point of entry. However, recruitment to (top) management positions may require additional testing.

The requirement for examination also applies to temporary contract staff and interim managers (unless recruited from inside the public service), even if the examination standards may be lower, as further testing would be required if a candidate decided to apply for a permanent position.

5.2. Examinations consist of components including written and oral examinations to test general and job- or career-specific skills and competencies of candidates

This lesson takes into account that merit recruitment requires a series of examinations, including a preliminary screening of candidates, the written examination of candidates, and a personal interview as the last stage of the process.

Written examinations can take on a variety of forms. Most commonly, they include general tests such as public administration knowledge and the assessment of job-specific or career-relevant skills and competencies of candidates. Ideally, they combine a variety of examination methods, including simulations and case studies, rather than employ multiple-choice testing only.

For *personal interviews* (cf. oral examinations) it is essential that they are based on frameworks such as competencies to provide clear guidance and ensure that interviews generate relevant information for the final selection decisions. Psychometric and/or *psychological tests* are often included as an assessment instrument to generate further information about the personality and suitability of candidates for jobs and careers in the public service.

5.3. Examinations are based on objective criteria to ensure their consistent application

This lesson takes into account that examinations should be based on clear criteria to ensure their consistent application. Written tests and personal interviews that are based on ad hoc methods increase the risk of inconsistent and potentially unfair implementation. Marking criteria should clarify threshold conditions and a transparent system for the allocation of points. Multiple choice tests have the advantage of consistency and transparency but may be less effective when it comes to the identification of certain skills and competencies.

5.4. Examinations lead to the ranking of candidates based on their performance and the final selection of the highest-ranked candidate.

This lesson takes into account that merit recruitment assumes the selection of the best-qualified candidate for a given job or career. The examination should thus employ a ranking method that differentiates candidates by performance during the examination and automatically offers the position to the top-ranked candidate or allows the top-ranked candidate to choose first.

By implication, the political leadership or even top management should not have a role in selecting a candidate unless they are members of selection commissions. For the selection of top management positions, it is debatable to what extent the political leadership should be given discretion to make the final selection from a list of examined and pre-selected candidates.

5.5. Examination and final selection are open to external scrutiny and appeal

This lesson takes into account that external scrutiny and the right to appeal are essential features of merit recruitment in the public service to ensure compliance with the law and, thus, both transparency and accountability of the process. Scrutiny should include internal initiatives to collect and regularly publish reports of recruitment and selection practices in the public service and external efforts by oversight bodies, merit protection boards, and civil service commissions outside the executive branch of government.

The right to appeal is usually enshrined in civil service legislation. For it to be effective, it is essential that recruitment processes are sufficiently transparent and scrutinisable, for instance, by making available detailed notes of examination and interview processes and/or by (video/audio) recording personal interviews. However, the quest for transparency and the right to appeal will need to be balanced with data protection requirements.

6. Onboarding and Induction

6.1. Central HR bodies provide support for the onboarding of new recruits by employing institutions

This lesson takes into account that onboarding is an important stage of merit recruitment and selection. It has a positive impact on the job satisfaction, well-being, and organisational commitment of public servants. At a minimum, central HR bodies should provide guidelines for institutions that include actions such as the welcoming of new recruits, the provision of documents relevant to the job and employing institution, in-house training for their application, and the assignment of mentors to effectively integrate them into the workforce of the institution.

6.2. New Recruits are required to attend general induction training and undergo evaluation before their appointment becomes permanent

This lesson takes into account that induction training is a fundamental aspect of merit recruitment and selection. In addition to onboarding at the level of institutions, it introduces new recruits to the public service and teaches essential knowledge and skills necessary for public servants. Effective induction should also be concluded with an assessment to ensure the goals of the training have been achieved. Further (performance) appraisal to move on from probation to permanent appointment is also desirable.



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