Roma Education Fund – Scholarships Programme Beneficiary Networking

Draft Strategy and Proposals

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Executive Summary

The Roma Education Fund's Scholarships Programme (henceforth, referred to as REF/SP) promotes equal access of Roma to higher education in 16 countries of South Eastern, Eastern and Central Europe by providing scholarships to Roma students to pursue tertiary education. In the last years, REF/SP staff, stakeholders, donors and beneficiaries have all demonstrated interest in the greater and longer-term involvement of REF/SP beneficiaries in the promotion of REF goals and Roma community development, with the suggestion that beneficiary networking would be a relevant approach to ensuring such. In order to understand the benefits of investing in networking among beneficiaries and the feasibility of establishing a networking programme, REF/SP commissioned a research and strategy development process, based on a broad survey of relevant opinions among different categories of stakeholders involved in REF and REF/SP, networking among scholarship beneficiaries and alumni affairs.

The research process undertaken has revealed that there is great interest and motivation among beneficiaries and stakeholders alike for beneficiary networking, although there is some scepticism as to the capacity of a network of beneficiaries to deliver all the results imagined by those surveyed, as concerns its capacity to offer meaningful opportunities for beneficiary engagement, as concerns the cost-benefit ratio and as concerns the extent to which the sense of community between beneficiaries is developed enough to be able to expect the emergence of networking without significant support.

Despite this scepticism, those surveyed are convinced that beneficiary networking could be very beneficial for the three main stakeholders concerned: the beneficiaries themselves, the Roma Education Fund and the Roma community more broadly. But, such benefits will not come about automatically upon establishment of a network or even once there is increased communication and interaction between members. Rather, networking should ensure that more targeted and systematic use is made of the human potential represented by the beneficiaries for specific programme and community related objectives. Related to this is the fact that, while certainly having potential to respond to several clear needs, beneficiary networking should not be seen as a solution for all the things beneficiaries and stakeholders would like to see improved in relation to the effectiveness of REF/SP and REF more broadly. As such, expectations placed on beneficiary networking should be realistic and commensurate to what professionals in the field consider "successful".

In relation to the activities that beneficiary networking might focus on, stakeholders and beneficiaries alike felt strongly that networking should focus on the priorities identified by the beneficiaries themselves and on integrating active network members into current work areas of REF to maximise mutual benefit. Deeper, more regular and more systematic planning and cooperation between the functional units of REF and the REF/SP is required to ensure the above. Especially in relation to the complex tasks requiring professional expertise, such as career support services, REF/SP should realistically assess "how far it can go", especially at the beginning. The research process reveals some of the characteristics of eventual beneficiary networking, as follows: both centralised and de-centralised; international and local/national (developing in parallel, rather than one or the other); self-directed by those beneficiaries interested in being involved (i.e. only a proportion of the total pool of potential network members); but with support from REF through advanced facilitation and remaining "informal" for as long as legal formalisation and institutionalisation is not required for effective functioning.

Stakeholders and beneficiaries alike acknowledged that such an initiative will entail many challenges, suggesting pragmatism and realism should be the way to deal with these. For those surveyed, this means REF/SP needs a clear work plan for the development of beneficiary networking, consulted and agreed upon with REF governance structures and staff concerned, and in the case of the decentralised (local/national) component, with the network members concerned; a flexible attitude

and capacity (in terms of time, resources, etc) to respond to challenges that arise; a clear and resourced evaluation and monitoring mechanism to assess progress in each phase of the development of the network; clear buy-in from (i.e. willingness on the part of) other REF staff to cooperate and actively participate in the development and implementation of the beneficiary networking programme using their work areas as a platform for beneficiary engagement.

There was considerable discussion about what the target group of such a networking programme should be. Considering the fact that the majority of those who have demonstrated their interest in this initiative by participating in the research process are current beneficiaries and considering advice received from professionals in the field of alumni affairs and beneficiary networking, our proposal is that REF/SP should develop a "beneficiary networking programme" that is as inclusive as possible of all scholarship recipients, current and former, that indicate their interest in being involved in some way. But, different kinds of network activities should target different kinds of beneficiaries, taking into account that the priority interests of current and former beneficiaries may differ, as can the interests of different categories of REF/SP beneficiaries (for example, RMUSP and LHP beneficiaries).

Taking the conclusions drawn from the research process in account, we would like to propose that the long-term aim of beneficiary networking might be formulated as follows:
- to create a mutually supportive community of current and former beneficiaries that is committed to actively supporting the fulfilment of the REF mission and the promotion of Roma inclusion more broadly.

The objectives of beneficiary networking could then be formulated as follows:
- to create conditions through which REF/SP beneficiaries can actively contribute to and participate in the fulfilment of REF's objectives and strategies;
- to provide a platform for current and former beneficiaries of REF/SP to self-organise around issues and concerns of interest to them, including but not exclusively Roma education;
- to develop a process of exchange and communication by which current and former REF/SP beneficiaries can support each other in the expansion of their social and professional networks within and beyond the Roma community;
- to enhance the access of REF/SP beneficiaries to information and opportunities that will support their educational, professional and personal development.

In considering implementation, strategic priorities must be established and in order for the above objectives to be fulfilled, even to some minor extent, beneficiary networking first has to be established. It seems to us at this point most pragmatic for REF/SP to make the clear distinction between activities to establish the network and the activities of the network per se (i.e. once it has been established). Hence, the recommendations made in this paper for the steps that should be taken to further this initiative from here on in focus almost exclusively on how to effectively establish the network, and ensure that it creates conditions for beneficiaries to engage more effectively with REF.

In this relation we would like to propose that the immediate-term strategic priorities (to be addressed in the first two years of activity) should be:
- putting the centralised networking infrastructure in place;
- further conceptualising, with those concerned (i.e. the potential network members) the roles and functions of the network within the overall framework of objectives outlined above;
- and initial kick off activities to get communication and interaction going.
The medium-term strategic priorities (to be addressed in the third to fifth years of activity) should be:

- consolidating the activity of the centralised networking infrastructure in a self-sustaining manner;
- ongoing networking activities; broadening the scope of the network to include a more significant decentralised dimension;
- interim evaluation of progress towards objectives and implementation of changes according to results.

The long-term strategic priority (ongoing from year 3) should be: ensuring the sustainability of network activity.

In our opinion, the implementation of the above proposal depends to a large extent on the successful re-working of internal communication and cooperation practices, to make it possible for a beneficiary networking programme to use existing programme infrastructure to best potential. This will require complete cooperation and additional work on the part of all REF programme staff, not just from those concerned specifically with the REF/SP. In the long run, beneficiary networking should become a transversal element in the REF work plan, for which responsibility for coordination and support lies with the REF/SP alumni coordinator.

Further, this initiative demands taking some risks. There is no guarantee that beneficiary networking can provide desired results such as improved REF/SP effectiveness (understood in terms of a lower instance of programme drop-out and a higher instance of graduation with a degree). As some stakeholders rightly pointed out, there are other things REF/SP could be doing to ensure that kind of result, especially more regular and systematic monitoring and evaluation of programme impact. Effective networking among beneficiaries will not happen without the development of more intensive communication and stronger relationships between REF/SP and the beneficiaries, requiring extensive facilitation, something that REF/SP does not have significant experience of. Sustainability cannot be guaranteed at this point. Rather, some initial testing and extensive evaluation will be necessary, before questions of how to ensure sustainability can be addressed. Some decisions of a fundamental nature will have to be taken by REF governance structures and senior management, considering the content of the research and proposals outlined including the clarification of how important beneficiary networking is for REF and why, what kind of cost-benefit ratio is acceptable for REF, considering that benefits and results of beneficiary networking become visible only in the long-term and whether REF is in fact ready for the implications of deliberately engaging beneficiaries more actively in evaluation and monitoring of REF progress, especially in relation to REF/SP.

Introduction

The Roma Education Fund's Scholarships Programme (henceforth, referred to as REF/SP) promotes equal access of Roma to higher education in 16 countries of South Eastern, Eastern and Central Europe (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine), by providing scholarships to Roma students to pursue tertiary education. REF/SP runs six scholarship programmes:
- Roma Memorial University Scholarship Program (RMUSP) – Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Turkey;
- Law and Humanities Scholarship Program (LHP) – Russia, Ukraine and Moldova;
- Interregional Scholarship Program;
- Supplementary Scholarship Program;
- Roma Health Scholarship Program – Romania and Bulgaria;
- Professional Development Grant.

The core programme, the RMUSP, has been supporting Roma students in tertiary education since 2000/2001, first under the auspices of the Open Society Institute, and since 2007, under the auspices of the Roma Education Fund (REF). It is estimated that approximately 1600 Roma students have received support. The other scholarship programmes mentioned above were rolled out at varying intervals since 2001, and provide Roma students with financial support for the fulfilment of more specific educational goals, including the pursuit of studies in the fields of law, social sciences and health, the pursuit of post-graduate studies at home or abroad, professional development opportunities and the coverage of gaps in funding for further studies.

In 2005/2006, attempts to initiate alumni activities among former scholarship recipients in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Slovakia were made, without significant results. Beneficiaries who did associate have not been able to consolidate activity and create sustainable associations. Nevertheless, beneficiaries continued to express interest and enthusiasm for the idea of alumni affairs and networking activities. REF governance structures, donors and staff have also expressed interest in the potential benefits of networking among beneficiaries for the achievement of REF's long-term goals. **In order to understand the benefits of investing in networking among beneficiaries and the feasibility of establishing a networking programme, REF/SP commissioned a research and strategy development process,** based on a broad survey of opinions among different categories of stakeholders involved in REF and REF/SP, networking among scholarship beneficiaries and alumni affairs.

The Research and Strategy Development Process

1/ Objective and terms of reference
To draft a strategy, including a plan of action, for the development of a REF/SP beneficiary networking programme with a view to supporting the effectiveness of the REF/SP and to providing opportunities for beneficiaries of REF scholarships to
  - gain further education, professional development opportunities and advance their careers;
  - access and exchange information relevant to them and their communities;
  - develop and expand their social and professional networks within and beyond the Roma community, nationally and internationally;
  - apply their skills and knowledge acquired during REF support;
  - become more actively involved in activities in support of REF goals, in general, and in outreach for the REF/SP in their communities and beyond.

The main questions that the research wished to find answers to were:
  - What interest and motivation is there for beneficiary networking among the target audience?
  - What are the potential benefits of developing and maintaining a beneficiary networking programme?
  - What needs might beneficiary networking fulfil for the beneficiaries themselves, for the Roma Education Fund and REF/SP as a programme and for the wider Roma community?
  - What forms might beneficiary networking take and which activities might it focus on?
  - What are the challenges that might be involved in setting up and developing beneficiary networking?

The interpretation of the information collected in this research process, as presented in this and appended documents, will provide REF/SP with a clearer understanding of
  - its positioning in relation to the tasks and challenges of establishing networking among its beneficiaries,
  - its chances for doing so

- the possible next steps that have to be taken to achieve sustainable networking among beneficiaries in the long-term.

Several key terms have been used throughout the research process and will also continue to be used in this document. For the purposes of clarity, the following definitions apply:

- The term **networking** refers to a supportive system of sharing information and services among individuals and groups having a common interest[1];
- In relation to the educational context, the term **alumni** refers to graduates or former students of a particular school, college, university or programme of studies[2];
- The term **beneficiary** refers to anyone who has received a REF/SP scholarship at least once during their tertiary education or university studies. Beneficiaries may be "former" (i.e. no longer receiving a scholarship) or "current" (i.e. receiving financial support from REF in the current programme year). Beneficiary does not refer in any way to whether the person concerned has completed university studies.

It is important to note that in the context of REF/SP, and until such time as this research and strategy development process was established, attention was focused on the establishment of "alumni" activities, in other words, activities for former beneficiaries. The question of whether REF/SP should more narrowly focus on the development of "alumni" networking or on the broader target group of beneficiaries has been extensively debated in the context of the research and strategy development process. Our conclusions in this regard are presented in the section of this document presenting our proposal for the target group and objectives for an eventual REF/SP networking programme. Considering the content of that debate, we have chosen to use the term beneficiary when referring to REF scholarship recipients in this document. Their status as former or current beneficiaries is referred to explicitly when relevant.

2/ Research process and methods

Research was conducted in several phases, during the period from beginning June to end November 2009, relying on three main methods of information collection:

- **Semi-structured interviews and roundtable discussions**[3]: These targeted specifically relevant stakeholder groups such as staff of REF, members of the REF governance structures responsible for the oversight of REF/SP, members of national selection boards, representatives of international institutional programmes working for the promotion of Roma rights, alumni associations and representatives of Roma youth organisations;
- **Questionnaire survey**[4]: This targeted REF/SP beneficiaries. All programme beneficiaries in years 1 to 9 of the programme (2001 to 2009 inclusive) for whom an email address was available in the Grant Management System (GMS) were sent the final beneficiary questionnaire in English and their local language in electronic format. In advance of this, a test-version of the questionnaire was distributed in hard-copy in Russian to 56 participants (from Moldova, Ukraine and Russia) of the July 2009 LHP Conference in Moldova. On the basis of the feedback received about the test-version, the final version was drafted;
- **Focus groups**[5]: These also targeted REF scholarship beneficiaries, but in a limited number of countries. Focus groups were held in Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. They involved a total of 43 randomly selected beneficiaries, representing a variety of study profiles, years of study, places of origin, cities of study, etc.

In the **first phase** of the research**, the preparatory phase**, the stakeholders that should be surveyed were identified, the questionnaire on the basis of which the survey of beneficiaries was to be

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[1] Webster's encyclopaedic dictionary of the English language, 1996 edition.
[2] Ibid
[3] Refer to Annex 3, Appendix 1, for a full list of the interviews and roundtable discussions conducted.
[4] Refer to Annex 4, Appendix 2, pp. 20-23.
[5] Refer to Annex 4, Appendix 3, pp. 24-25.

conducted was developed, tested, revised and translated into local languages for dissemination and the logistical preparation of the focus groups and roundtable discussions was undertaken.

Concerning stakeholder groups[6], the following categories of stakeholders were targeted for interviews and inclusion in roundtable discussions:
- REF Staff
- REF/SP Strategy Board Members
- RMUSP National Selection Board Members
- REF Donors
- International Institutions with programmes focused on Roma
- Roma Youth Organisations
- Reference Alumni Associations
- Other Scholarship Programmes
- REF RMUSP and LHP National Coordinators

Concerning the development of the questionnaire:
- Although the questionnaire survey was initially planned to be conducted in English, it soon became apparent that this would limit considerably the potential for receiving an adequate number of responses, hence it was decided that the questionnaire would have to be translated into local languages for each of the programme countries concerned;
- An initial version of the questionnaire (referred to throughout the appended documents as the "test-version" of the beneficiary questionnaire) was developed and distributed in Russian language in hard-copy to participants of the LHP conference that took place in Moldova in July 2009. 41 valid questionnaires were returned in hard-copy from among the 56 participants attending the conference;
- On the basis of the way in which these questionnaires were filled out and feedback received from the organisers of the LHP conference, the questionnaire was thoroughly revised and broadly disseminated using electronic contact information in the Grant Management System (GMS) with 129 valid results. The major differences between the test and the final versions of the questionnaires are that the final version included several numerical questions and a request for the voluntary provision of personal information;
- The summaries of results developed on the basis of questionnaires received, therefore, contain narrative information for those questions that were identically formulated in both questionnaire versions, test and final. But, only the 129 valid questionnaires received in electronic format have been used in the establishment of the statistics about the sample, because these contained personal information about respondents;
- Considering that the estimated overall number of beneficiaries is approx. 1600, the overall response rate to the questionnaires comes to just under 11%. Detailed information concerning the response rate for each question can be found in appendix to Annex 4: Summary of Beneficiary Perspectives.

Concerning focus groups:
- The focus groups were the only opportunity for the research team to discuss directly with beneficiaries, something that given previous experiences of research and evaluation within REF, was considered extremely important by senior members of staff and members of REF/SP's governance structures;
- Direct contact with beneficiaries was considered especially important because the success of any networking initiative is understood by stakeholders as to be implicitly bound up with the sense of need and motivation for networking among beneficiaries themselves;

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[6] Refer to Annex 3.

- Within the scope of this project it was not feasible to hold meetings with beneficiaries in all programme countries, so choices were made about which countries to visit based on pre-agreed criteria;
- These were: interest in the alumni initiative and potential for networking activities previously expressed by beneficiaries and REF/SP coordinators in the country concerned; apparent capacity for networking demonstrated by groups of beneficiaries in particular countries; existing organisational and associative infrastructure of relevance in specific countries; previous experiences piloting alumni activities within REF;
- In addition, countries in which the levels of interest (as indicated by the numbers of applications received for scholarships each year) differ considerably were visited. In other words, countries with both high and low levels of applications for REF scholarships were included among those where focus groups were organised;
- Focus groups were held in Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia and involved a total of 43 beneficiaries. More information concerning the composition of the participant groups that attended the focus groups and the discussions that took place can be found among the appendices to the summary of beneficiary perspectives, Annex 4.

In the **second phase,** that of **data collection,**
- 24 individual interviews with a variety of stakeholders were conducted amounting to more than 35 hours of recorded materials[7];
- 2 roundtable meetings, one with a selection of REF staff and another with a selection of REF RMUSP and LHP National Coordinators, were conducted.
- 41 valid test-questionnaires were received in hard-copy format from participants of the LHP conference in Moldova in July 2009;
- 129 valid questionnaires were received in electronic format from respondents from 11 programme countries;
- 5 focus group meetings were held involving a total of 43 beneficiaries in 5 different countries (Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia).

In addition, project progress meetings were regularly held with the REF/SP task manager and one interim presentation was made to the REF/SP strategy board.

In the **third phase**, that of **drafting**
- the data collected was summarised into a series of documents that can be found in the technical annexes, and analysed to provide the basis for the following discussion and recommendations, in the form of strategy and activity proposals.

3/ Challenges experienced during the research process
As in any research process, unexpected hurdles arise as the process is being implemented. In the hope that some of the difficulties we experienced during this research process can be avoided in the future, and because many of these challenges will have direct implications for the implementation of our recommendations, we present a summary of the main challenges experienced in the process:
- **Functionality of the Grant Management System (GMS), data protection and intellectual property issues:** The GMS currently in use in the REF/SP is the only source of information about beneficiaries, including contact information, we could rely on in the research process. Unfortunately, its functionalities are not adapted to the extraction of relevant statistics about beneficiaries nor to contacting them via electronic mail. Much of the contact information included in the GMS for beneficiaries is totally out of date, because the REF/SP does not maintain contact with former beneficiaries once they are no longer receiving a scholarship.

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[7] Refer to Annex 3.

Intellectual property rights for the Scholarships Programme are currently shared between OSI and REF because of the re-positioning of the SP to REF in the mid-2000s, leading to a lack of clarity concerning the rights of REF to communicate with beneficiaries supported under OSI. There is also a certain lack of clarity about which beneficiary information within the GMS can be used and/or distributed. Accessing accurate information about how to solve the technical, data protection and intellectual property rights challenges encountered was slow, and led to significant bottlenecks and delays in the research process. It was also, therefore, not possible to establish accurate statistics about the pool of beneficiaries that might be considered the target audience of this initiative and to make comparisons with the sample accessed through the research process.

- **Language and communication:** The necessity of having to communicate in local languages with beneficiaries was not foreseen from the outset, leading to significant translation needs for the dissemination of the questionnaire, for the collation and interpretation of responses collected and for the conducting of the focus groups, further delaying the research process.

- **Logistics:** The organisation of the focus group meetings proved complicated for a number of reasons. The availability of students for meetings was limited due to the summer break, followed by the beginning of the university term and exam periods. In addition, the national coordinators had little time to assist in the organisation of meetings because the research period coincided with the REF/SP application process for 2010. As a result, the focus group meetings were postponed several times and finally took place in late September and October, the period during which the initial research plan had foreseen for drafting and finalisation of the strategy document.

- **Conceptualisation of the strategy development process:** There was a certain lack of clarity on the process that would follow the presentation of findings and recommendations, which complicated the process of research conceptualisation and drafting. It was not clear from the outset who would read the documents, with which purpose and what kind of decision-making process would follow with regard to proposals made. In addition, the total workload involved in the survey of beneficiaries, and the large number of stakeholders that should be surveyed, and, therefore, the time required for the whole research and strategy development process was significantly underestimated by all concerned, both REF/SP and the consultant.

Summary of Main Findings

In the following section a **summary** of the main findings is presented.[8] It is presented thematically, following the main question areas the research process addressed, rather than according to the category of respondent questioned (i.e. beneficiaries and stakeholders). It represents a synthesis of all the main conclusions that one can draw from all the information gathered during the research process from all categories of stakeholders and all beneficiaries consulted. We have chosen this approach because there was so much convergence between the opinions of the groups surveyed. Nevertheless, where different categories of respondents have different or opposing views, this is flagged. To the extent possible we have cross-referenced conclusions presented to those parts of the detailed summaries of findings (of stakeholders and beneficiaries) that discuss the findings concerned, for easy reference.

The summary is organised according to five sections corresponding the main lines of enquiry researched. The main questions that the research wished to find answers to were:
- What interest and motivation is there for beneficiary networking among the target audience?
- What are the potential benefits of developing and maintaining a beneficiary networking programme?

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[8] The detailed findings of the research process are to be found in the summaries of stakeholder and beneficiary perspectives (Annexes 3 and 4 respectively).

- What needs might beneficiary networking fulfil for the beneficiaries themselves, for the Roma Education Fund and REF/SP as a programme and for the wider Roma community?
- What forms might beneficiary networking take and which activities might it focus on?
- What are the challenges that might be involved in setting up and developing beneficiary networking?

1/ Interest and motivation for networking

We can safely conclude that the **level of interest in the initiative to develop a networking programme is high to very high among the beneficiaries themselves**.[9] A minority expressed scepticism about the effectiveness and sustainability of an eventual network, but nevertheless indicated interest in participation.

Interest among stakeholders in the initiative and its potential can also be considered high. The majority welcome the initiative to make use of the clear human resource represented by the beneficiaries for the programme and the Roma community. Some nevertheless, expressed scepticism about the potential level of investment required to achieve results, and the timeframe within which results might become visible. In other words, a **minority of stakeholders question the cost-benefit ratio that can be expected to be achieved** in the case of such an initiative.

Results for how often beneficiaries would be willing to participate in activities (for the majority, once a week or once a month) indicate **strong general motivation for participation in networking (although these results might be considered "quite optimistic").**[10] At the same time, results also indicate that **REF should be pragmatic in relation to the expectations it has concerning the level of activity of the network.**[11] Those who are still studying or who are working alongside their studies might have high motivation but more limited availability for networking.

Motivation for networking is largely seen as a matter of interest, incentive and will, rather than of objective constraints such as a lack of time. Nevertheless, **motivation was often expressed with what might be considered as "conditions"**. For example, motivation for participation was also considered a factor of how well / effectively communication in the network would be maintained and facilitated. Further, **beneficiaries want networking to be meaningful**. Although, strong trends in relation to what meaningful refers to were not apparent, we can conclude that **meaningful networking is that which offers members of the network**
- **benefits in terms of educational or professional development;**
- **opportunities to contribute in some way to the improvement of the situation of the Roma community, especially in the area of education;**
- **a sense of being "part of something" worthwhile, relevant and effective.**

It is further apparent that **while beneficiaries feel a sense of commonality with the other REF scholarship recipients, it remains passive in the absence of mechanisms for the development of an active community**.[12]

We, therefore, conclude that:
- **interest is high across stakeholder groups concerned;**
- **some scepticism exists concerning the effectiveness of networking and its cost-benefit ratio over time;**

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[9] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 2-4.
[10] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 14-15.
[11] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 14-15.
[12] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 1-2.

- **the motivation of beneficiaries has both material and immaterial dimensions;**
- **the sense of community between beneficiaries is not yet sufficiently developed to be able to expect the emergence of networking without support.**

2/ Potential benefits of establishing networking

It is safe to conclude from the information gathered in the research process that **the majority of respondents consulted, beneficiaries and stakeholders alike, see many potential benefits being derived from the existence of a well organised and effective beneficiary networking programme.**[13] The types and kinds of benefits that might be derived from the existence of the network are very diverse. Suggested **benefits can be grouped according to three main categories:**
- **personal benefits: with a strong emphasis on educational and/or career development, and opportunities for civic engagement;**
- **community benefits: with a strong emphasis on the improvement of the perception of the Roma minority in majority society and Roma inclusion;**
- **programme benefits: with a strong emphasis on how the greater involvement and inclusion of beneficiaries in the work of REF and REF/SP can improve their effectiveness and outreach.**

Nevertheless, results point to the fact that **few expect such benefits to come about simply as a result of putting in place the network infrastructure** and creating opportunities for increased communication between beneficiaries themselves and between REF and beneficiaries.

We, therefore, conclude that:
- **beneficiary networking is perceived as having many potential benefits;**
- **but such benefits will not come about automatically upon establishment of a network or even with increased communication and interaction between members;**
- **rather, networking should ensure that more targeted and systematic use is made of the human potential represented by the beneficiaries for specific programme and community related objectives;**
- **such would also ensure personal benefits for beneficiaries participating;**
- **systematic evaluation is required to document if and how benefits are being accrued.**

3/ Needs that could be fulfilled by networking

The majority of beneficiaries that participated in the survey consider the development of a beneficiary networking programme "needed".[14] Nevertheless, discussion of the need for a network is difficult, because few if any respondents could establish a causal link between what they could imagine as networking and specific needs they had/have. Having said this, beneficiaries made clear statements to the effect that if a network existed, it could fulfil certain needs. This is also the case for the majority of stakeholders surveyed. They see **networking between beneficiaries as a logical extension of the existing work of the REF/SP, and as a potential contribution to increasing the effectiveness of the scholarship programme** (understood as ensuring students get through their studies, actually graduate and even find a job in their field).

Similarly to the question of potential benefits, three categories of needs that could be fulfilled were identified:
- those of beneficiaries;

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[13] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 3-5 and 12-13 and summary of stakeholder perspectives pp. 2-4.
[14] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 2-4.

- those of the wider Roma community;
- and those of the Roma Education Fund.

In relation to the needs of beneficiaries, **personal, educational and professional development, access to opportunities for participation in different kinds of community-relevant projects and actions, access to valuable information and being part of a supportive community** might be considered most important, although a large number of different needs were mentioned and strong trends were not apparent.[15]

In relation to the Roma community more broadly, it is noteworthy that the list of needs that might be fulfilled by a networking programme **reveals the insecurity of the beneficiaries about the prejudice experienced by the Roma community. The most important relate to improved social acceptance and visibility for the Roma community in majority society.[16]**

In relation to the needs that might be fulfilled by a networking programme for the Roma Education Fund, it is noteworthy that the most important are currently **weakly covered by existing REF programme activities.** These included **evaluation and impact assessment of the Scholarship Programme and other REF activities, inclusion of beneficiaries (current and former as appropriate) in ongoing activities of REF (in the fields of research and advocacy, for example), active use of role models and "success stories" for attracting new applicants, for conducting public relations and for creating positive visibility for the programme.[17]**

Despite the generally positive attitude of stakeholders to what a beneficiary networking programme be able to fulfil in terms of needs if it were put in place, a minority of those surveyed argued that **beneficiary networking should not be seen as a panacea for all the things that might need to be improved in REF/SP.** These stakeholders made the case for having reasonable expectations regarding what beneficiary networking can achieve, and called for consideration to be given to how REF/SP might need to change over time to meet the beneficiary expectations expressed in the discussion of needs (especially in relation to academic support beyond the provision of the scholarship financing and support for making the transition from education to the labour market).[18]

We, therefore, conclude that:
- **beneficiary networking is perceived as having the potential to fulfil a wide variety of needs for beneficiaries, the wider Roma community and the Roma Education Fund;**
- **but it should not be seen as a solution for all the things beneficiaries and stakeholders would like to see improved in relation to the effectiveness of REF/SP and REF more broadly;**
- **therefore, the expectations placed on beneficiary networking should be realistic.**

4/ Activities and forms of networking

A very wide range of activities and forms of networking were raised by those consulted during the research process.[19] Nevertheless, some clear trends in relation to the possible priorities of an eventual beneficiary network became apparent. For clarity, the following discussion pertains to the possible activities of an eventual beneficiary network (once it has been established) and not to activities to

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[15] See summary of beneficiary perspectives p.3
[16] See summary of beneficiary perspectives p. 4.
[17] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 3-4 and of stakeholder perspectives pp. 2-4.
[18] See summary of stakeholder perspectives pp. 4-6.
[19] Refer to Annex 3, pp. 6-7 and Annex 4, pp. 8-9.

establish the network. These are discussed in detail in the section of this document entitled "Towards the establishment of a beneficiary networking programme".

The majority of those surveyed mentioned **four areas of work they think networking should address by priority,** as follows:
- **supporting current beneficiaries to complete their studies successfully;**
- **supporting beneficiaries in making the transition from education to the labour market;**
- **supporting beneficiaries to do something useful for the Roma community;**
- **supporting beneficiaries in contributing to the struggle against prejudice and discrimination against Roma.**

In relation to the above priority areas, it is noteworthy that **much of what beneficiaries and stakeholders alike consider as priority work areas for an eventual beneficiary networking programme is already being done by REF**. Yet, existing REF projects and work areas currently do not systematically make use of the human potential represented by the current and former beneficiaries of REF/SP, estimated to number as many as 1600. Yet The creation of **more effective channels of participation** for network members in these work areas **would suffice for the network to be able to offer the kind of "meaning" respondents to the survey have stated is important to motivate them** to get actively involved.

In relation to the first priority, supporting current beneficiaries to complete their studies successfully, it was argued by many of the stakeholders surveyed that **the current relationship of REF/SP with beneficiaries, which is almost exclusively administrative and financial in nature, is insufficient, and that without changes to the nature of communication and interaction with current beneficiaries, it will not be possible to develop the capacity of the programme to effectively support students through the challenges of studying to graduation.** These stakeholders also consider the current relationship insufficient for encouraging the emergence of an active network. They argue that minor adjustments to the way in which REF/SP currently interacts and communicates with new beneficiaries from the outset of being awarded the scholarship would make it possible to develop a more sustainable sense of community among beneficiaries. This would then lay the foundations for the sustainability of networking. This attitude was echoed by beneficiaries who point to the fact that they do not have the chance to meet and get to know their co-beneficiaries, and are often not aware who else attending their university is a REF beneficiary. They expressed interest in having the opportunity to know and meet these others, not least because they might be able to provide valuable advice for the initial getting used to being a student period at the beginning of one's studies.

It is further noteworthy that **the second priority, supporting beneficiaries in making the transition from education to the labour market, is the only priority for which REF/SP does not have a specifically targeted programme of some sort. Beneficiaries expressed strong interest in career support services** and see a beneficiary networking programme as a possible location for accessing such. On the one hand, they fear they will have difficulties in finding a job in their field of specialisation once they graduate – because of the general lack of relevant graduate employment and because of discrimination against Roma in their countries. They also feel they lack access to information, advice and support for making an effective transition from education to the labour market. On the other hand, **stakeholders from the field of career development services warned against being overly ambitious in relation to what a network can do for the career development of its members and argued for a cautious assessment of "how far REF should go"** at this early stage.

They suggested that it would be realistic for a REF/SP beneficiary networking programme to invest in establishing an effective platform for **self-organised mutual career support among network members**.[20]

Concerning the last priority, **beneficiaries and stakeholders alike expressed interest in the potential offered by a networking programme for creating alliances with non-Roma organisations (student, youth, professional).** On the one they see personal added value for network members in having more direct professional contacts and cooperation with relevant non-Roma organisations, especially from the perspective of labour market entry and mobility. On the other hand, non-Roma organisations engaged in the civic sector in areas such as the promotion of human rights and non-discrimination represent ideal partners for working towards the eradication of Romaphobia.

A small, but nevertheless, **convincing minority of stakeholders question the extent to which elements of what the beneficiaries consider to be priorities for an eventual networking programme in terms of activities, would not in fact rather be aspects of what the REF/SP and other REF programmes should be doing to improve their own effectiveness**. A good example of this is additional academic support activities, such as mentoring or tutoring. These stakeholders proposed that would beneficiary networking be established then it would be one of the platforms through which mentors might be recruited to participate in additional academic support activities, such as those experimented with in the context of the LHP. But, they questioned the extent to which the networking programme should organise and provide mentoring as one of its core activities. Several other categories of activity could be seen in the same light (English language learning support, thesis assistance, study related support services, etc).

One question on which **little consensus was apparent** was the **form that networking should take**. In discussion with beneficiaries, the question usually revolved around the issue of **whether the networking programme should aim to develop some form of international and / or national association/s with legal personality and related characteristics**. Our discussions with stakeholders revealed that there are a great variety of models of networking involving students, beneficiaries and former-beneficiaries, ranging from independent formal associations of alumni to combined alumni and career services programmes bringing together all members of the community related to a particular educational institution or programme, from highly centralised and facilitated networks to completely self-organised Facebook groups, from local informal initiative groups of former students to highly institutionalised students' unions with graduate wings and activities. **No one model seems to fit the nature of the REF/SP, because no other programme or institution found in the public domain can be considered sufficiently comparable.** Nevertheless, a great number of the models encountered offer experiences and practices that are relevant to the development of REF/SP beneficiary networking. This is particularly the case in relation to "how networking works" in practice. In other words, we can gain significant insight into how to effectively motivate, keep network members involved and help them to actively participate

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[20] This does not mean that the network should not engage in career support activities, but in the absence of professional staff with special expertise for such, it should do so taking into account how to make best use of existing programmes and available resources. For example, REF/SP recently introduced a Professional Development Grant. It provides additional financial support to up MA/PhD students currently receiving a scholarship from REF to undertake field research for their thesis completion or to attend conferences or to receive training in their field of specialisation. The re-conceptualisation of such a Professional Development Grant, so as to make it applicable to a wider range of professional development purposes, to former beneficiaries (as well as current), and more of them per year, is potentially an interesting starting point for REF to explore how far it can indeed go in supporting beneficiaries in their transition from education to the labour market.

from the experience of other programmes and alumni associations. It is also particularly the case in relation to the technical aspects of social and professional networking using new media and ICT.

Finally, there were **important discussions about the level at which networking should begin, continue and be maintained, mainly juxtaposing the international with the local and national levels**. In the first place, beneficiaries seem quite aware of the constraints for international networking (language barriers, finances and time for travelling to face to face meetings, the "abstractness" of the international level and its distance from the real problems of Roma communities). So, they **acknowledge that important aspects of networking** (such as those related to mutual support between beneficiaries in the academic field, disseminating information about REF opportunities to local communities and even public diplomacy and advocacy activities) **should be organised at the level closest to where the problems and needs are and to which they have the best access (i.e. the local and national levels).** At the same time, **they find international networking attractive and believe it will have important benefits for them in terms of personal and professional development**. Further, several key international stakeholders see international networking among REF beneficiaries as a way to improve their (currently unsatisfactory) access to the target groups which should benefit from their programmes (for example, the Council of Europe and European Union Roma internship programmes for Roma graduates). Finally, the majority of those surveyed point to the fact that technology has changed the nature of communication and created closer and independent connections between the different levels, without requiring one to move up through a hierarchy of local to international via national and/or regional. They see **significant opportunities for encouraging more individualised forms of participation on the part of beneficiaries (for example, online)** and for the different levels of networking (local/national and international) to support each other.

We, therefore, conclude that:
- **networking should focus on priorities identified by the beneficiaries themselves and on integrating active network members into current work areas of REF to maximise mutual benefit;**
- **deeper, more regular and more systematic planning and cooperation between the functional units of REF and the REF/SP is required to ensure the above and to avoid duplication;**
- **expectations of networking and the results it can produce need to remain realistic, especially in relation to complex tasks requiring professional expertise such as career support services;**
- **some of the possible characteristics of an eventual beneficiary networking have emerged, as follows:**
    - **centralised and de-centralised;**
    - **international and local/national (developing in parallel, rather than one or the other);**
    - **self-directed by those beneficiaries interested in being involved (i.e. only a proportion of the total pool of potential network members);**
    - **but with support from REF through advanced facilitation;**
    - **remaining "informal" for as long as legal formalisation and institutionalisation is not required for effective functioning.**

5/ Challenges in establishing and sustaining beneficiary networking

Beneficiaries and stakeholders alike identified a wide range of structural, infrastructural, technical, logistical, communication, resourcing, motivational and communication related challenges, all of which might indeed impede the development of networking.[21]

The most important for beneficiaries were related to
- **capacity to communicate – language, technology;**
- **resources – availability of financial and human resource support/facilitation;**
- **motivation – willingness and availability of beneficiaries themselves to actively participate, self-organise and work with the network on a voluntary basis.**

Stakeholders mentioned similar challenges, but placed more emphasis on issues such as
- the **institutional capacity of REF/SP to change** and add the new layer to its programming and governance that would be represented by networking among beneficiaries;
- the **cost-benefit ratio** between the level of required investment (especially human resource investment) for the level of participation that is realistic
- the question of **whether results are likely to become visible within the life expectancy of the Roma Education Fund**;
- the **difficulty of accessing the former beneficiaries** for whom it is likely that REF and the scholarship received are no longer on the radar.

It should be noted, however, that **the question of challenges was approached in a largely pragmatic manner**. Beneficiaries and stakeholders alike were convinced that with an adequate analysis of the challenges, a sufficiently well developed planning and preparation process, and adequate crafting of a realistic work-programme, an eventual beneficiary networking programme will be able to flexibly respond to the challenges arising in the phase of implementation. In this relation, it was noteworthy that the majority of those surveyed think the challenges will differ considerably from context to context, and encouraged those responsible for the initiative to consider this carefully in the development of the approach to working on the decentralisation of the network. In particular, beneficiaries were keen that **the initiative and choice of focus / priorities for decentralised networking should be decided locally, by members of the network themselves**. They, and other stakeholders, considered this **essential for the development of the ownership of the network on the part of the members**.

Stakeholders and beneficiaries alike pointed to the **need for close monitoring and regular evaluation,** and not only in relation to the network and its activities. Beneficiaries see the network as a mechanism for them to have a more important role in providing evaluation feedback and input that could help to improve REF/SP and other REF activities, something for which they currently feel relevant mechanisms are missing. Further, there is **a sense that more could be done to make better use of existing programmes and mechanisms in / or in development within REF for involving beneficiaries in the priority work areas in which they are most interested**. Both of these points represent challenges in and of themselves, because they will require not insignificant structural adjustments to the internal working practices of REF/SP and the other programmes of REF. Further, they will require the willingness of REF staff not only to cooperate but to actively participate in the development and implementation of any networking programme.

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[21] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 5-8 and summary of stakeholders' perspectives pp. 4-6 and 7-8.

We, therefore, conclude that:

- **A pragmatic approach to the many challenges that objectively might impede the development and implementation of a beneficiary networking programme is required. This means REF/SP needs:**
  - o **a clear work plan for the development of beneficiary networking, consulted and agreed upon with REF governance structures and staff concerned, and in the case of the decentralised (local/national) component, with the network members concerned;**
  - o **a flexible attitude and capacity (in terms of time, resources, etc) to respond to challenges that arise;**
  - o **a clear and resourced evaluation and monitoring mechanism to assess progress in each phase of the development of the network;**
  - o **clear buy-in from (i.e. willingness on the part of) other REF staff to cooperate and actively participate in the development and implementation of the beneficiary networking programme using their work areas as a platform for beneficiary engagement.**

Target group and proposal of objectives

As a preface to the introduction of our proposal for the objectives of an eventual beneficiary networking programme, we think one further issue requires more in depth discussion. This relates to the target group of such a programme and of the network on which the programme will be based.

As mentioned in passing in the introduction to this paper, the question of the extent to which what REF/SP is trying to achieve with this initiative can be understood as an "alumni networking initiative" in the classical sense came up regularly during the research process, from the side of those being surveyed. To an extent this may be because, until recently, the work conducted in this relation was referred to as work with the "alumni" of REF/SP. Early initiatives were piloted as "alumni associations". Certainly, there was also some terminological confusion among beneficiaries and stakeholders surveyed – during the research process many fell into a habit of using the terms "alumni" and "beneficiaries" interchangeably for the people who will eventually become members of the network. It, therefore, seems opportune to clarify what the target group of an eventual beneficiary networking programme and the network itself should be. This will add context to the objectives proposal that follows.

First, our survey of beneficiaries points to the fact that most respondents have no prior experience of alumni affairs. Nevertheless, the majority had heard the term before and could make relevant associations with it, including that alumni (in the educational context) are more often than not graduates of university, and that in the case of REF/SP this would imply former beneficiaries.[22] Yet, **the majority of the beneficiaries that participated in the research are current beneficiaries** (in other words, currently studying), demonstrating their active interest in networking.[23] Second, is that stakeholders, especially those professionally active in the fields of beneficiary networking and alumni affairs, are absolutely convinced that success in networking hinges on the development of strong relationships with the target audience and a strong sense of community among potential network members. The results of our survey point to the fact that the sense of community felt by beneficiaries relatively weakly incorporates being a beneficiary of the scholarship. Rather it combines aspects like being Roma, or being part of a new educated generation, etc.[24] **Programmes that consider their current beneficiaries as "alumni in training", however, can help to develop this sense of**

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[22] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 4-5.
[23] Refer to statistical summary concerning the sample of respondents in Annex 4, Appendix 1.
[24] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 1-2.

community actively and, therefore, have greater chances of success. Third, the extent to which the former beneficiaries are lost to the network is largely an unknown quantity for REF/SP, as is the number of former beneficiaries who have graduated, due to fact that the programme does not track the beneficiaries' progress once they are no longer receiving the scholarship. The majority of those surveyed believe it will be **very difficult to begin networking from this position of a lack of contact with the target group.**

Given the above, **we believe that it is not advisable to conceptualise this initiative very rigidly in terms of "alumni affairs", in its classical sense,** thereby excluding the majority of beneficiaries who have demonstrated their interest in networking by participating in the research process, and all those potential "alumni in training". They have shown that their interest is in the potential content of the network and the opportunities it could offer them to gain benefits, but also to contribute. The results of the survey of beneficiaries points to the fact that it largely does not matter what REF/SP decides to call its initiative to network **beneficiaries,** because they **are most concerned with issues such as whether what the network is for and what it is supposed to do are clear, whether it is well organised and offers network members meaningful opportunities for engagement**.

Our proposal, therefore, is that **REF/SP should develop a "beneficiary networking programme" that is as inclusive as possible of all scholarship recipients, current and former, that indicate their interest in being involved in some way.** But, different kinds of network activities should target different kinds of beneficiaries, taking into account that the priority interests of current and former beneficiaries may differ, as can the interests of different categories of REF/SP beneficiaries (for example, RMUSP and LHP beneficiaries).[25]

Taking the above into account and considering the conclusions drawn from the research process, we would like to propose that the **long-term aim** of beneficiary networking might be formulated as follows:
- **to create a mutually supportive community of current and former beneficiaries that is committed to actively supporting the fulfilment of the REF mission and the promotion of Roma inclusion more broadly.**

The objectives of beneficiary networking could then be formulated as follows:
- **to create conditions through which REF/SP beneficiaries can actively contribute to and participate in the fulfilment of REF's objectives and strategies;**
- **to provide a platform for current and former beneficiaries of REF/SP to self-organise around issues and concerns of interest to them, including but not exclusively Roma education;**
- **to develop a process of exchange and communication by which current and former REF/SP beneficiaries can support each other in the expansion of their social and professional networks within and beyond the Roma community;**
- **to enhance the access of REF/SP beneficiaries to information and opportunities that will support their educational, professional and personal development.**

Towards the establishment of a REF/SP beneficiary networking programme

A great number of suggestions were made in the course of this research process about what beneficiary networking could and should do in terms of activities. The objectives outlined above, along with the priority interests of the beneficiaries, in terms of activities and benefits, delineate the parameters within which any networking programme should be developed. In this relation, it is important to reiterate that we have already discussed in some detail what those surveyed in our

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[25] See summary of beneficiary perspectives pp. 8-9.

research process consider the priority content and activities of an eventual beneficiary networking programme. But, clearly, for any of those activities to become a reality, the network has to be established and function. Therefore, this section will deal with what it will take to establish a network that can deliver results in relation to the aim and objectives proposed. In so doing, we more **clearly differentiate between the activities of an eventual REF/SP beneficiary networking programme and those of the network of beneficiaries that will come into being as a result of this initiative.** For the majority, therefore, the proposals below relate to what REF/SP and/or REF more broadly should do, rather than to what the beneficiaries should do.

We would like to propose that, **in relation to any REF/SP beneficiary networking programme:**

- the **immediate-term strategic priorities** (to be addressed in the first two years of activity) should be:
    o **putting the centralised networking infrastructure in place;**
    o **further conceptualising, with those concerned (i.e. the potential network members) the roles and functions of the network within the overall framework of objectives outlined above;**
    o **initial kick-off activities to get communication and interaction going**.

- The **medium-term strategic priorities** (to be addressed in the third to fifth years of activity) should be:
    o **consolidating the activity of the centralised networking infrastructure in a manner that can become self-sustaining;**
    o **ongoing networking activities;**
    o **broadening the scope of the network to include a more significant decentralised dimension;**
    o **interim evaluation of progress towards objectives and implementation of changes according to results.**

- The **long-term strategic priority** (ongoing from year 3) should be:
    o **ensuring the sustainability of network activity.**

While the following proposals are NOT presented in chronological order, taken together they could be considered as the **steps REF/SP could take through time to set up, further develop and maintain sustainable networking.** Several of the activities outlined below would have to be ongoing during the whole period and in parallel, while some have to be completed in order for others to begin. **These proposals, will, therefore, have to be translated into a scheduled and budgeted work plan.** That will require priorities to be made between different kinds of activities, requiring more or less cash and/or staff time investment on the part of REF/SP and REF more broadly.

We consider each of these steps necessary. But, there are many different kinds of activities that might help REF/SP to make each step. We make some specific **recommendations in relation to what we consider realistic** based on our knowledge of the current financial and human resource capacity of REF and REF/SP for beneficiary networking and what certain of the proposals might eventually "cost". But, the bottom line is that **REF and its governance structures will have to decide "how far to go",** as some results cannot be achieved without more significant investment than REF currently has at its disposal for this initiative, and the choice to go with certain activities over others will require significant investments.

In reading these proposals, the following should be noted in relation to the question of "costs":
- we present what can only be considered "guesstimations" of the eventual costs involved in each group of activities, in terms of time, money and commitment;
- **our estimations are presented on a scale from high to low, to indicate the ease or difficulty with which each might be achieved by REF;**
- we have made a **distinction between cash investments**, for example, those that would be needed to pay for tasks that cannot be achieved by in house-staff due to a lack of time or a lack of relevant expertise **and time investments that could be made by existing staff.**

In the immediate term (Years 1 and 2)

1/ Documentation of the target group and creation of a functional networking database
The pre-requisite for any form of networking to become possible in a sustainable manner is the availability of adequate information about the target group to ensure communication. The current state of play is not adequate for the information and communication needs of a networking programme. Practical solutions need to be found for the creation of conditions conducive rather than prohibitive to direct communication with network members, as is currently the case. That demands the buy-in of both the IT and legal departments to work through challenges that are already apparent and those which will arise in the process in a timely manner.
- **REF does not have up-to-date contact information for all beneficiaries**. An essential preparatory task, therefore, is to update the contact information of beneficiaries. This can be achieved over time by testing whether email addresses are still valid, requesting that beneficiaries update their contact information online and conducting detective work to find the remainder. REF/SP has to inform itself carefully about the data protection implications of conducting such an update and would have to make sure that the relevant disclaimers and legality clauses are adequately explained in any communication with beneficiaries;
- **A database that allows for a wide range of voluntarily shared information about network members to be collected and stored is needed.** The functionalities of the database must include possibilities for:
  o online updating of information by network members themselves;
  o the extraction of complex statistics;
  o automated communication to all email addresses contained in the database;
  o automated notifications when changes are made;
  o storage of additional materials (i.e. photo and CV uploading, etc), etc.
  While it is unlikely that the current GMS can be adapted sufficiently to fulfil the needs of a functional network database, such should be researched and ruled out before investment in other database solutions.
- REF/SP should use the contacts with other alumni and beneficiary networking programmes established during this research process to **solicit advice about the range of functionalities it would need from its network database beyond those indicated, about where the database might be best located (i.e. on the REF server or another independent server) and about data security issues**;

In terms of costs, we estimate that the above will require **high cash, high time and high commitment investments**:
- Updating beneficiary contact information is a task that will require more significant staff-time investment at the beginning, but will be ongoing in the mid- and long-term perspectives. Considering the current staffing and workload situation at REF/SP, this is a task that lends itself well to outsourcing should the data-security situation allow for it;
- Cash investments in technological development of a suitable database will be required, whether an existing database model is adapted or a new database is developed. For this

special technical expertise is needed that is likely not available in-house. Again this is a task that lends itself well to outsourcing;

- The preparation and oversight of these tasks, especially if they are outsourced, will require significant work time and commitment on the part of the current alumni coordinator. An important dimension of this process will be coordination of the involvement of other REF (especially, the national coordinators) to support the process of updating of beneficiary information.

2/ Identification and negotiation of key partnerships
The research process revealed that on both the international (i.e. European) and local levels **there are potential partnerships that, would they exist, could effectively support the establishment of sustainable beneficiary networking**. Four categories of partnership that should be further explored and developed are evident:

a/ Partnerships with organisations in the European Roma Movement
- Federation of European Roma Young People

b/ Partnerships with institutional programmes active in promoting Roma Rights
- Council of Europe, Roma and Travellers Unit
- European Commission, Office of the Special Representative for Roma Issues
- Open Society Institute, Roma Programmes

c/ Existing local associational infrastructure of Roma young people / students
- Novi Sad Students' Union
- Roma associations in university towns where there is a high concentration of beneficiaries

d/ Other scholarships programmes, alumni associations and beneficiary networking programmes
- OSI Scholarships Programme
- Central European University Alumni and Career Services Programme
- Romaversitas Hungary and Macedonia

Partnership and regular communication with such partners will provide
- **information about opportunities** offered by their programmes that might not be on the radar of the network members, including fellowships, internships, scholarships, conferences, seminars, research projects, opportunities for activism, etc;
- **access to potential funding sources for projects and activities of network members** at both the international and local levels.

In terms of costs, we estimate that the above will require **low cash, high time and high commitment investments**. The development of partnerships with the above will require:
- Some cash resources to ensure travel to relevant face-to-face meetings and the organisation of common activities (as appropriate);
- Significant ongoing time investment on the part of the alumni coordinator, as it involves ongoing communication and regular face-to- face meetings;
- The ongoing support and involvement of REF senior management and relevant governance structures to give such partnerships the required prestige and to ensure that partners also "get something out of" the partnership.

3/ Integration of networking programme and other areas of REF's work:

REF's own activities, particular those already underway in the areas of grant-making (monitoring visits, grant assessment and selection, advice, presentation of specific projects), policy development (research, participation in policy activities, advocacy) and scholarships (dissemination, outreach, selection, evaluation, etc) **could be much better used as a platform to engage the interest and motivation of beneficiaries, and, therefore, as a foundation for network activities.** Ongoing activities in these work areas would offer network members opportunities for testing out and developing their competencies, for engagement in actions useful to the Roma community and for developing a sense of community with other beneficiaries and REF itself. In addition, REF could be making better use of beneficiaries (and their achievements) in its ongoing public relations and fundraising activities. Until now, attempts to engage beneficiaries in REF's activities have been done on an ad hoc basis, without a clear concept and on short notice. Unsurprisingly, this has created frustration among both REF staff and the beneficiaries.

In our opinion, **integration between an eventual networking programme and other functional units of REF requires cooperative conceptualisation of how integration will work, advance planning, ongoing communication and mutual information and mutual evaluation.**

In terms of costs, we estimate that the above will require **low cash, high time and high commitment investments**:

- full buy-in to the development of the networking programme from all REF staff responsible for relevant activities;
- a clear commitment from staff of the various functional units to mutual cooperation and information, including the development of relevant new communication practices;
- acceptance of the additional tasks and time the above will imply in their workload. At the very least, staff concerned would have to dedicate time for regular planning and coordination meetings and for the identification and communication of information in their possession relevant to the network (for example, uploading information about relevant activities and requests for participation to an eventual online networking platform).

4/ Planning and creation of an online networking platform

Information and communication technologies (ICT) offer an eventual REF/SP beneficiary networking programme opportunities for deepening interaction and community ties, across borders and between people who come from very different communities. The research process has also revealed that the vast majority of those surveyed have what they consider to be both adequate experience of and access to technology to be able to make good use of an online networking component. **We believe that the online component of any REF/SP beneficiary networking programme will be extremely important**, as even small scale face-to-face activities can be difficult to organise and expensive.

There are several different kinds of online platform that might be of use to a REF/SP beneficiary networking programme. The choice of such is dependent on several factors, but mostly on what the platform is supposed to be able "to do" in terms of functions for users (network members and REF/SP, among others). Clearly, **there are significant overlaps between the conceptualisation and development of any online platform for networking and the development of a functional network database**. The best would be to use integrated technology. For example, the online updating of the database by network members themselves is made possible through the online networking platform. **REF/SP faces one key choice in relation to the online platform. It has to decide whether it will use free public platforms (for example, Facebook, Linked In, Ning) or whether it will invest in dedicated technology, developed for its own purposes (for example, on the basis of relevant freeware such as Moodle).**

But, there are **advantages and disadvantages** to each scenario:
- On the positive side, and with the right kind of evaluation mechanism to monitor the quantitative and qualitative aspects of networking, **the use of free public platforms would help REF/SP to understand the real extent of online participation by network members before having to invest significantly upfront in dedicated technology**;
- On the negative side, really effective networking on such sites requires extensive facilitation (for example, finding, classifying and uploading information, starting and animating discussions, developing online surveys, etc).
- For its part, **the development of a dedicated platform is very expensive in terms of up-front costs for technology development**, and professional assistance from experts on the development of social networking sites and tools would be necessary. Further, a dedicated platform requires just as much facilitation as a public one.
- **On the other hand, there are potential long-term benefits to be gained from an integrated technology solution that is designed from the outset for the purposes of REF/SP beneficiary networking. Up-front investment in the development of a dedicated platform may in the long-run be less expensive than ad hoc technological development as time goes by and as new needs become apparent.**

Given the above, and depending entirely on which variant is chosen, we estimate that the above will require **medium to high cash, high time and high commitment investments.**

Finally, an important challenge not to be underestimated in the development of online networking, whether using a public or dedicated platform, will be language. Neither English nor Romanes can be considered a lingua franca between the beneficiaries. Local language corners would be possible on a dedicated platform, but these will add a dimension of complexity to development, maintenance and updating and facilitation. Facebook and certain other public platforms are available in relevant languages. But, this does not address the fact that to be useful content uploaded to the platform has to be understandable to the majority of users.

5/ Initial Membership Drive
A network needs members. Once the minimum infrastructure has been put in place (in other words, availability of updated beneficiary contact information, Facebook and/or other social networking groups, links to relevant sources of information, staffing for facilitation of online networking, clarity on legal issues around data protection, etc), the network should be publicly launched. In this case, as the network would be "starting from scratch", the initiative has to be explained to its target public. To achieve this, we propose **an initial membership drive, in other words, a series of activities to engage former and current beneficiaries' interest and motivation to get involved and associate (formally) with the network**. This would involve:
- **Initial communication and request for membership:** Initial communication with beneficiaries has to be established. Within a clearly identified period of time **as many beneficiaries as possible, and the wider Roma movement, should be informed that the network is open for business and is "calling all beneficiaries" to join up**. Such communication should explain the purpose of the network, what kind of benefits it will offer members, how membership works, the kind of activities members can be involved in, etc. This first communication would request recipients to register as members of the network and get acquainted with the online platform and begin communication and interaction. In so doing, they would voluntarily agree to provide the network with certain kinds of information, which it commits to treat in full confidence and to store in full security, thereby bypassing the data protection problems experienced in the research process and establishing a precedent for direct communication between the network and individual members;

- **Network kick-off meeting:** One of the key points raised in the research is that **effective networking has a face-to-face component. It was suggested that an international meeting would be a very suitable activity to launch the network**, the international dimension being a great incentive to motivate network members to participate. Such a meeting would have a number of purposes: informing interested network members about the network's purpose and opportunities; discussing and deciding together on the direction and priorities of networking activities (within the framework of established objectives); discussing how to deepen the sense of community; debating key current Roma issues; hold decentralised "national" meetings to discuss the focus of national/local networking and how to develop networking in each specific context; planning key activities. Such a meeting could also be used effectively for public relations and for reaching out to the wider Roma movement / community for partnership and recognition. Stakeholders involved professionally in alumni associations and beneficiary networking advised that offering all network members one opportunity to meet per year is very important for the sustainability of networking;
- **Identification of national/local initiative-takers:** To function the decentralised dimension of networking will have to respond to needs and concerns identified locally by network members themselves in consideration of the specific local context. Hence, efforts will have to be made to identify those active network members who are willing and able to take the "lead" in decentralising networking. At the same time, research results demonstrate that the local level would expect and need support for the process of identifying those local initiative-takers. On this basis, local initiative groups could be piloted at a staggered pace depending on interest and resources, and on the concentration of beneficiaries in a particular setting (town, university). In so doing, using locally established Roma youth and / or student association infrastructure (where it exists) would make good use of previous experience;
- **Activities for new beneficiaries:** New beneficiaries, as mentioned previously, are "alumni in training". With each new round of scholarship awards, REF/SP has the opportunity to sensitise potential network members to the benefits of active participation. Taking up this opportunity would require minor adjustments to the application and scholarship programme documentation that already exists, and to the format of the orientation meetings. It would also require the addition of a face-to-face dimension of contact between the programme and the beneficiaries while they are receiving the scholarship, for example, a meeting in the middle of the academic year in each country where the programme is active, so that all beneficiaries from the same country can get to know each other and the networking programme.

In terms of costs, a lot depends on the choice of activities, as clearly the number of meetings, and the level at which they would take place, have important cost implications Nevertheless, we estimate that the above will require **high cash, high time and high commitment investments:**
- the face-to-face meetings involved in the initial membership drive are going to be expensive, because of the number of people they would bring together, the travel costs they imply, the number of in-country meetings that are implied, etc. Our estimation is that an international kick-off meeting would not cost less than 50,000 euros to organise. Organising an annual event at which all network members would have the opportunity to gather will represent significant costs on an annual basis. New beneficiary networking meetings once per year in each country would certainly not cost less than 3,000 euros per meeting, and theoretically they could take place every programme country, although it is likely at the beginning that they would be piloted in only some programme countries.
- The workload implied by the initial communication activities, the identification of and support to the local/national initiative-takers and the oversight of the organisation of the face-to-face activities is well beyond the part-time human resource capacity currently dedicated to alumni related activities within REF/SP. The alumni coordinator position

should be made a full-time position, implying the need for investment on human resources reorganisation and the reallocation of the current tasks of the alumni coordinator not related to beneficiary networking to other existing or newly recruited staff.
- The above activities will require the full support of REF senior management and the REF governance structures to ensure relevant prestige and legitimacy in the public domain.

6/ Development of support activities for networking

At the beginning of any networking initiative facilitation and support are very important. Our research revealed strong demand on the part of beneficiaries for such support, in the form of training, advice, funding opportunities and facilitation of communication. REF/SP will have to decide how far it can go in the provision of such, taking into account that it may have important implications for the speed at which networking produces results.

Facilitation for networking online has been dealt with under the section dealing with the online platform, above. But, face-to-face facilitation at the local and national level will be more challenging. REF RMUSP and LHP country coordinators who attended the roundtable meeting for coordinators told us that they have neither time nor motivation, in some cases, to be very heavily involved in the promotion or facilitation of networking at the national and/or local level, given the number and complexity of their tasks for the programme already. Plausibly, the local initiative takers could be involved in providing support and facilitation for the decentralised level of networking. But, first they need to be identified and activated, although, in the long run, their time might have to be compensated. Therefore, we would propose that the issue of facilitation-support be taken up again at the point when local initiative groups are beginning activity and a more detailed needs assessment in relation to needs can be made.

In terms of costs, we estimate that, nevertheless, the above will require **low cash, high time and high commitment investments:**
- Only a minimum of additional cash investment would be necessary if existing REF resources and programmes are used well for the development of such network support. For example, within the current REF grant-making programme, a sum could be set aside for small grants to local or national network projects of relevance. By orienting beneficiaries who make specific requests for training towards ongoing training opportunities in project management, or related skills, being organised by REF or its partner organisations, it would not be necessary to invest in specific training programmes. Further, a plausible solution for ensuring facilitation for decentralised networking might be to remunerate the local "lead initiative takers" (see above) for time invested on a case-by-case basis. As such, "lead initiative takers" could act as intermediaries between the centralised networking programme and local initiative groups, and provide them with advice and facilitation, rather than having to organise that centrally;
- Nevertheless, the coordination of such support will require a large work-time investment on the part of the alumni coordinator, and may also have implications in terms of workload for staff other REF programmes.

7/ Putting in place an evaluation and monitoring system for networking

As in any project development process, how project progress will be monitored and evaluated has to be planned from the very beginning. **Benchmarks for the evaluation process have to be developed and adequate tools and time need to be available for conducting evaluation on an ongoing basis.** One key preparatory task is the planning of the evaluation of how networking is developing and progressing towards its objectives.

Further in regard of evaluation, however, is the wish of beneficiaries to be more involved in evaluation of the REF/SP, or at least in the provision of feedback to REF/SP concerning aspects of

the programme that might be improved. While these might seem like a completely different issues, we are of the opinion that **the planning of the evaluation of network progress is an opportune moment for instituting a more developed system for receiving feedback from beneficiaries in relation to the functioning and impact of REF/SP**. With the right kind of facilitated technology beneficiary evaluations of networking and feedback to impact and functioning of the programme could be gathered and processed through the online platform, without the necessity for significant time and money to be invested in evaluation activities, such as interviews and questionnaires, etc, even if a larger scale consolidated evaluation might be undertaken in the medium term (see the next section).

In terms of costs, we estimate that the above will require **low cash, high time and high commitment investments:**
- the objectives of networking can be used as a basis for the development of key qualitative and quantitative benchmarks for networking progress;
- both public and dedicated online platforms can be used for conducting evaluations of networking and broader evaluations of the functioning of REF/SP, and with technical expertise support, for the collation of evaluation results, without the need for manual data-entry;
- but, the interpretation of evaluation data collected will require significant work-time on the part of the alumni coordinator on a regular basis;
- in addition, the later use of evaluation results for improving programme effectiveness requires significant political will on the part of senior management and the governance structures of REF.

The medium term (Years 3 to 5)

Appropriate activities for the medium term depend on the results of the initial preparatory period. Nevertheless, we believe that the key tasks in this phase will revolve around consolidation of network achievements and functioning of the first two years.

1/ Consolidating the centralised networking infrastructure
After two years of functioning, the centralised networking infrastructure (i.e. database, online platform, networking support programme, engagement of other REF staff and programmes in networking, etc) will have matured sufficiently for the need for adaptations to become apparent. At that point, the questions that REF/SP will face will include:
- whether to upgrade the functionalities of the online networking component to include new functions or a dedicated platform;
- whether the human resources dedicated to the programme have been sufficient for all the tasks involved;
- the extent to which the face-to-face dimension of networking at the international level has been sufficiently developed;
- which kinds of ongoing activities are effectively engaging network members, etc.

2/ Decentralisation of networking
Based on the experience with pilot local initiative groups during the first two years of networking, and subject to some form of evaluation of the extent to which investment in facilitation and networking support have been making the impact they were expected to, further decentralisation of networking might be undertaken. This could involve:
- extending the piloting of "local initiative groups" to additional cities in countries where they might already be active or to new countries;

- consolidation of local initiative groups into more formalised associations, depending on the demand for such by the local initiative groups themselves;
- the training in by current "lead initiative takers" of new initiative takers to ensure continuity and turnover in network support;
- the extension of network support mechanisms (funding, training, advice, etc) available from the centralised networking infrastructure for decentralised networking.

3/ Interim evaluation of networking progress towards objectives
While ongoing evaluation will provide information relevant for the consolidation of the international infrastructure and the decentralisation of networking, questions of impact and sustainability require more significant evaluation. An interim evaluation could, therefore, cover:
- quantitative analysis of networking;
- qualitative analysis of networking;
- assessment of benefits accrued to beneficiaries involved and to REF;
- impact assessment in relation to REF/SP programme effectiveness;
- impact assessment in relation to the four key priorities of beneficiaries or specific priorities identified in the preparatory phase;
- cost-benefit ratio between investment and impacts / results;
- assessment of progress towards the aims and objectives of the network;
- assessment of the network and REF's capacity for sustainable continuation and development of the network.

The long term (Ongoing from year 3)

1/ Ensuring the sustainability of network activity
Planning for the development of sustainability is an essential, although extremely difficult, task. So much of what determines the sustainability of a network can only be assessed on an ongoing basis through the process of development. At the same time, certain issues in relation to sustainability seem clear already now:
- Funding
- Governance
- Autonomy and independence of the network (creation of a formal association)
- The availability of support beyond the lifecycle of REF and the Roma Decade

Such issues have to be considered, and evaluated, throughout the process of development, and conclusions in this regard need to be drawn in the context of the interim evaluation, before any specific activities for ensuring sustainability can be undertaken. But, in our opinion, it is likely that these will include greater attention to fundraising, so that the network might have resources of its own to work with beyond those which can be offered by REF, and a debate about the legal form that the network at the international level might take (transition from a programme to an international association, for example).

The positioning of REF/SP in relation to setting up beneficiary networking?

The findings of our research process, as presented above, help us to understand what the field thinks about networking between beneficiaries of the REF/SP, and therefore what REF might have to do to develop a beneficiary networking programme. Combined with what we have been able to learn about REF and REF/SP during the research process, our proposal for the objectives of REF/SP beneficiary networking and our specific proposals for the further development of the networking initiative outlined above, we feel ready to formulate an opinion on the positioning of REF/SP in

relation to setting up a networking programme. In other words, the question is what are REF/SP's chances for establishing a beneficiary networking programme?

On the positive side, REF/SP is a programme of long-standing experience and the largest Roma specific scholarship programme in Europe. It has an extensive decentralised network of staff in the countries of the programme, with knowledge and access to beneficiaries that although requiring encouragement and motivation to become actively involved in beneficiary networking, welcomes the initiative. REF/SP has further put in place dedicated staff (limited as it may be with a half time position) to the development of beneficiary networking, and has shown that it is genuinely concerned with rolling out new programmes based on evidence of need, rather than donor driven priorities. In relation to external factors, REF already has several key partnerships that can be mobilised in support of the development of networking, has running programmes which would only need minor adjustment to become more supportive of networking, and beneficiary networking is something that certain REF donors are interested in funding. But, when thinking about how REF/SP is positioned for actually implementing the above proposals, two key areas of further concern, nevertheless, emerge.

The first relates to the special characteristics of REF/SP in comparison to other programmes for networking alumni and/or scholarship beneficiaries. These characteristics have a bearing on the kind of relationship and communication REF/SP has had so far with the community of beneficiaries and the kind of communication beneficiaries might want to have with REF/SP:
- The relationship to the beneficiaries has so far been extremely limited, and has focused on the administration of the scholarship. The programme has no formal relationship or communication with former beneficiaries;
- REF/SP is a grant-making programme and not a programme of studies or a university. Further, the programme does not guarantee scholarship funding from acceptance through graduation from university subject to academic merit, and therefore, beneficiaries may have only received the scholarship once, in one academic year, even if they applied in other years. Hence, in comparison to the graduates of specific study programmes or universities, REF/SP beneficiaries have a relatively weak sense of having had a common experience;
- While the results of our survey do bear out the idea that beneficiaries have being members of the Roma community in common, there is also a sense of ambivalence in relation to self-identification as Roma. Beneficiaries and stakeholders alike attest to the fear that beneficiaries often experience of having to identify themselves as Roma – fear of discrimination, fear of exclusion, etc. Hence, the fact that the REF/SP is a Roma specific programme may in fact be a disincentive for beneficiaries to actively associate and participate in networking;
- Clearly, alumni and beneficiary networking programmes of the more classical type (i.e. those associated to high merit scholarship awards or to high prestige universities) are working from another starting point, in terms of the sense of community and incentive attached to membership.

A second area of concern relates to the internal working practices of REF more broadly, in terms of decision-making about priorities, financial investments, work organisation, etc. While the exact contours within which a beneficiary networking programme will be implemented remain to be finalised (and our proposal for such may not be that which is finally adopted), there are already some indications for the capacity of REF as an institution, and of REF/SP as a functional unit, thereof, for facing up to the challenges involved in developing networking. These have been interpreted from perceptions of REF gathered in discussions with REF staff, external stakeholders, beneficiaries and from our own observations through the research process:
- The establishment of a beneficiary networking component in REF/SP will be a considerable departure from hitherto routines and, in the end, amounts to the extension of the

programme beyond its current scope and tasks. The "readiness" of the whole REF system for this is not entirely clear;

- There is a lack of consensus as to whether, if and how REF/SP should be adjusted (in structure and content) to accommodate a stronger community development component, through among other initiatives, beneficiary networking. This is a fundamental question about the long term goal of the REF/SP rather than beneficiary networking;

- REF has been established with a clear and definite time frame in mind, the duration of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. A sustainable networking programme assumes indefinite existence, and certainly a time frame beyond the end of the Roma Decade. The question that cannot be answered at this point is whether the remaining time until the end of the Roma Decade will be sufficient for REF/SP to establish and spin-off beneficiary networking so that it can function autonomously;

- Beneficiaries would like to have more direct involvement in providing feedback to the REF/SP and in evaluating its impact, and see beneficiary networking as a potential platform for that. External stakeholders think it would be suitable and appropriate for REF/SP to be evaluated regularly by its beneficiaries. However, the extent to which this kind of external oversight is considered desirable or a priority on the part of REF governance structures or staff seems to be limited;

- REF is already facing extensive technical and legal issues with data collection, storage and protection, and intellectual property rights, which day to day frustrate the work of the REF/SP and de facto limit capacity for communication with beneficiaries in a timely and structured manner. The initiation of beneficiary networking is likely to increase the frequency of these problems. At the moment, the capacity of the IT and legal departments for dealing with such issues in a timely manner seems to be limited;

- There are potentially quite significant financial limits on how much REF can afford to invest in beneficiary networking. Many of the activities outlined above can be done with the existing part-time staff investment and the 25,000 euros per annum that has been nominally allocated for beneficiary networking, although this would have significant implications for the speed at which implementation would take place and at which results could be expected to become visible. There is a clearly a large discrepancy between the current resources available to beneficiary networking and the kind of investments, especially in human resources, that would be needed to implement the above proposal.

Overall, this represents a fairly balanced picture. In our opinion, REF/SP is neither badly nor well positioned, at this moment in time, to initiate beneficiary networking. REF/SP has many strengths and competencies to rely on, but additional rethinking and reworking of internal practices will be needed to ensure that these compensate for the weaknesses outlined above.

Conclusion: Thinking to the future?

This document has presented a proposal for the further development of REF/SP beneficiary networking on the basis of the results of a broad survey of people and institutions concerned with Roma education and community development, as well as people and institutions experienced in the development of alumni and beneficiary networking programmes.

In making our proposal, we have tried to remain as realistic as possible, while taking a comprehensive approach. Colleagues active professionally in the field of alumni affairs and beneficiary networking warned against embarking on this initiative with half measures. So, we have tried to make proposals which from the outset consider the results of the research and the capacity and resources apparently available to REF/SP and REF more broadly, but which nonetheless take into account all the steps that would be required to ensure the effective establishment of a functional network.

Considering the above, and by way of conclusion, we would like to the make the following final points in relation to thinking this initiative into the future:

- The implementation of the above proposal depends to a large extent on the successful re-working of internal communication and cooperation practices, to make it possible for a beneficiary networking programme to use existing programme infrastructure to best potential;
- This requires complete cooperation and more than likely additional work on the part of all REF programme staff, not just from those concerned specifically with the REF/SP. In the long run, beneficiary networking should become a transversal element in the REF workplan, for which responsibility for coordination and support lies with the REF/SP alumni coordinator;
- This initiative demands taking some risks. There is no guarantee that beneficiary networking can provide desired results such as improved REF/SP effectiveness (understood in terms of more beneficiaries of REF/SP graduating with a degree). As some internal and external stakeholders rightly pointed out, there are other things REF/SP could be doing to ensure that kind of result, and this is something REF should consider specifically evaluate;
- Effective networking among beneficiaries will not happen without the development of more intensive communication and a long-term relationship between REF/SP and the beneficiaries, requiring extensive facilitation, something that REF/SP does not have significant experience of;
- Sustainability cannot be guaranteed at this point. Rather, some initial testing and extensive evaluation will be necessary, before questions of how to ensure sustainability can be addressed in practice. Nevertheless, certain precautions can be taken from the outset – for example, leaving the choice of networking priorities to small initiative groups of beneficiaries themselves to ensure motivation and interest on their part;
- The community of beneficiaries and stakeholders surveyed in the research process are now curious to see what REF/SP will finally do with this initiative and how it will do it. This has both potential and risks attached to it, and REF/SP will have to take active measures to ensure that their curiosity does not turn to disappointment (because things that were announced do not get done, etc). There are credibility and legitimacy issues for REF in not taking this initiative further, as much as in taking it further;
- Some decisions of a fundamental nature to will have to be taken by REF governance structures and senior management, considering the content of the research and proposals outlined:
  - How important is beneficiary networking for REF? Why?
  - What kind of additional financial investments is REF (overall) willing to make in beneficiary networking, considering the needs and the limited budget currently allocated? What kind of cost-benefit ratio is acceptable for REF, considering that benefits and results of beneficiary networking become visible only in the long-term? Is the establishment of beneficiary networking something for which REF could/should be fundraising?
  - What kind of mandate does REF want the beneficiary network to have? Is REF ready for the implications of deliberately engaging beneficiaries more actively in evaluation and monitoring of REF progress, especially in relation to REF/SP?
  - Does REF foresee from the outset the spinning-off of the beneficiary network (although not necessarily, the beneficiary networking programme) as an independent associative structure?

In depth discussion of these questions, in addition to the proposals made in this document, by REF senior management and governance structures will be necessary in order to ensure a coherent

approach to launching the initiative to establish beneficiary networking – internally, towards staff and externally, towards all the stakeholders and beneficiaries who voluntarily participated in the research process, as well as the wider community concerned by the initiative. More than anything else, REF/SP and the other internal REF stakeholders concerned by this initiative and the proposals made here for its further development, will have to consider issues of legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the community concerned, the former and current REF/SP beneficiaries.