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# Taking stock of S3 Peer Review Workshops

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# Taking stock of S3 Peer Review workshops

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## Abstract

While advocating that the Smart Specialisation is a process in which the bottom up involvement of stakeholders is crucial, the S3 Platform has from 2012 organised a number of informal Peer Review workshops in which peers from all across Europe, experts and Commission Staff have given feedback and policy advice to regions and countries that have presented their ongoing process of designing and developing RIS3. This paper is a technical report of experiences and perceived impact from the regions and countries which were reviewed in the first twelve Peer Review Workshops during 2012 and 2013. The findings and reflections presented were produced in a survey and a stock-taking event being organised in November and December 2013 and are discussed in relation to further development of the work of the S3 Platform.

**Keywords:** Peer Review, Smart Specialisation, mutual learning, trans-national learning, impact assessment, S3 Platform, participatory methods

<sup>a</sup> The views expressed are purely those of the author and may not in any circumstances be regarded as stating an official position of the European Commission.

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## 1. Smart Specialisation and Peer Review

The 'Innovation Union' flagship initiative of the Europe 2020 strategy sets out a comprehensive goal for growth in a smart, sustainable and inclusive way. Regions and Member States across Europe contribute to achieve these goals through their Research and Innovation strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3). Smart Specialisation is a strategic approach for structural change through targeted investments and support in the field of research and innovation, concentrating resources on selected and limited number of priorities based on place based competences. RIS3 is a continuous process informed by analysis of the region, including the national and global context and by integration of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms already from the start (RIS3 Guide, European Commission, 2012). The priority areas with competitive advantages are expected to be identified through entrepreneurial processes of discoveries, requiring an inclusive governance system where visions, goals and an appropriate policy mix for implementation of the strategy are embedded in a wide group of stakeholders, and in such a way mobilising also private investments.

A Smart Specialisation strategy is an ex-ante conditionality for regions and Member States in order to receive European Structural and Investment Funds for the programming period of 2014-2020. The European Commission has launched the Smart Specialisation Platform (S3 Platform) to assist the regions and Member States (MS) in the development, implementation and monitoring of RIS3. The S3 Platform has taken the approach of supporting regions and Member States with structural guidance and tools and by creating a community of practice, allowing regions and MS meet peers, experts and commission staff, and together and jointly explore the different ways in which S3 can be designed, developed, implemented and improved. In the core of the activities of the Platform stands the development of a series of Peer Review workshops and a methodology of peer review.

Peer review in this sense means that the RIS3 process of a region or a country is assessed and evaluated by peers from other regions and countries across Europe in a given and defined process. The design of the activity is done in such a way that both reviewers, named critical friends, and representatives from the reviewed region or country are guided through a process of self-reflection and mutual learning. The main aims of the peer review workshops are twofold; firstly to facilitate a flexible and open discussion with sharing of information in an informal atmosphere. The dialogues should be built on trust and openness. The emphasis is on learning together and from each other, from peers of diverse mix in relation to nationalities, levels of government and expertise. Secondly, the workshops offer regions and countries the possibility to present their work on RIS3 to peers from all across Europe, solicit the peers to discuss with them their most pressing questions related to the development of the strategy and to receive their feedback and policy advice.

Showing the progress in designing the RIS3 to others increases the probability that challenges or weaknesses will be identified, and suggestions for improvement will emerge through the

exchanging of good practice and experiences. Such a process allows not only the peer reviewed region, but all regions and national authorities present to learn from each other's experiences and to enhance the transferability of good practice. By stimulating the emergence of critical friendships, an open and trusted community of practice is being created where experts, policy analysts and policy makers from regional, national and EU level together follow the advancement of RIS3 strategies of regions and member states and are exploring ways forward in open and dynamic dialogues.

The S3 Peer Review Workshops allow for a high number of regions and countries to be reviewed, and for the participants to switch roles, being both reviewed and be a critical friend (reviewer) in the same workshop. It also allows a wide number of regional and national representatives to participate in the learning processes as there are no pre-selection of participants to the workshop, but an open registration expecting participants to carry their own costs.

This working paper is a technical report of experiences and perceived impact after having held twelve Peer Review Workshops over two years in 2012 and 2013. The report presents shortly how the workshops and the methodology of S3 Peer Review have evolved, and then explains how the S3 Platform have taken stock of the experiences and collected feedback from the regions through a small survey and a stock-taking event taking place in December 2013. The results from these two approaches are presented and the findings discussed in relation to further development of the work of the S3 Platform.

## **2. Two years of S3 Peer Review Workshops and moving forward**

The first peer review workshop of the S3 Platform was organised in January 2012 and in the following two years, a total number of 12 peer review workshops took place. The workshops allowed for a total number of 45 regions and 4 member states<sup>1</sup> being peer reviewed by critical friends (peers and experts) from in total 132 regions across Europe representing 27 different Member States (leaving only Luxemburg out) and two countries from outside of the European Union (Norway and Serbia). More than half (55%) of the regions represented participated to more than one workshop, some to as many as 5 and 6 events. In total, more than 700 participants excluding staff of the European Commission attended S3 Peer Review Workshops these two first years.

The methodology for peer review used in the workshops developed and improved constantly over the two years, until reaching the format being presented in JRC Working paper *The S3 Platform Peer Review Methodology* (Midtkandal and Rakhmatullin, 2013). In parallel, surveys followed the regions of the first three workshops in order to understand the motivation of the policymakers to present their work for peer review, and to which extent their expectations were met (Rakhmatullin, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> See complete list of peer reviewed regions and Member States in Annex 1.

The novelty of the RIS3 concept required basic knowledge of the RIS3 process to be disseminated during the first events, while as the RIS3 design processes advanced, the scope and focus of the events not only moved forward to stay tune with the regions, but also matured and developed as a result of previous experiences. Nevertheless, the process of the workshops has always been divided into three phases, (i) preparations (ii) the peer review workshop and (iii) post-workshop follow up. Each of these three phases contains several elements and it is precisely these elements that have emerged or been improved over time.

The individual peer review sessions are based on a presentation prepared and shared in advance of the workshop. The presentation is prepared along a template given by the S3 Platform. This template takes the region or country through the six steps of the RIS3 Guide (European Commission, 2012) and hence gives the critical friends an overview of the whole strategic process with elements linked to all of the six steps of RIS3. Even though all the workshops have had a specific topic for the plenary sessions (Multilevel governance, quadruple helix, green growth etc.), the peer review itself has been general, reflecting the whole strategy and allowing the region or country under review to choose its own focal points and weight given to any of the steps. The prepared presentation includes a set of questions chosen by the region or country under review. The critical friends discuss these questions in smaller groups of 6-10 after the presentation from the region under review. The groups are asked to take the discussions through three steps: first identify the real questions behind the issue at stake; then offer their policy advice addressing the question; and finally collect the key insights for all of them to take home from the session. After the discussions, feedback is given to the region from experts and from all of the tables. The representatives from the region under review are in the end asked to reflect shortly upon the given policy advice and identify steps it might take upon returning home.

In the later Peer Review workshops, a questionnaire based on the Guidance for Expert Assessment (RIS3 Guide, Annex III) has been used for (i) self-assessment, (ii) expert-assessment and (iii) peer-assessment. The evaluation form contains over 50 questions covering 9 major areas that are likely to be used to evaluate regional/national RIS3 strategies. A data triangulation of the assessments will emphasise potential discrepancies for the region to reflect upon. Outcomes of the workshop and the data triangulation are presented in a feedback report together with a summary of the presentations and discussions. A more detailed description of the S3 Peer Review Methodology this can be found in the above mentioned working paper.

### ***Taking stock through a survey and an event***

In assisting the regions on their journey towards RIS3, the S3 Platform has taken a bottom up approach responding to the requests and needs of the regions and countries across Europe. It became clear that the peer review workshops had developed into an important tool for mutual



learning and dissemination of development. Efforts have there for been invested for continuous improvement of the methodology.

As the demand from regions wanting to be peer reviewed did not cease and peers kept attending workshops as critical friends, more events were scheduled beyond 2013 and into the new programming period starting in 2014. Two important questions then arose:

1. What is the actual impact of the S3 Peer Review exercise? Significant time and effort are put into the process from those being peer reviewed, from the critical friends and experts, from hosts and from the S3 Platform team organising the events and writing feedback reports to all the regions and countries being reviewed. Since demand was not falling, the assumption of the platform was that the exercise apparently was valuable at some level. But we did not know for sure what made it valuable, what were the important elements and if and what kind of impact it had in the longer run. Furthermore, if there were room for improvements, the S3 Platform would be open to take new or modified direction.

2. The second question is related to changing circumstances as strategies are moving into a phase of consolidation and implementation and a general peer review approach might not serve the needs of the regions and countries any longer. Nevertheless, the concept could easily be adopted to look at specific elements of the RIS3 process, adapting to for instance implementation and policy mix of RIS3 and to monitoring and evaluation.

Before moving into a second phase of S3 Peer Review Workshops, the S3 Platform therefore wanted to know more about **the usefulness and impact of the exercise and more about what elements of the exercise to bring forward, or change**, in order to adapt to the changing reality around RIS3 and take on board recommendations from the participants having undergone the peer review exercise.

To be consistent with the RIS3 message of involvement of stakeholders and the participatory approach to peer review, we wanted to have an approach based on dialogue also to the way forward: to let the participants of the workshops be our peers and in an informal setting give us an honest and open feedback on their experience with the peer review workshops and the different elements of the S3 peer review methodology.

Firstly, all the 49 regions and countries that had been peer reviewed in the 12 peer review workshops were invited to a stock-taking event in Seville in December 2013<sup>2</sup> to put the peer review methodology, the workshops and the S3 Platform in the centre of attention and let it undergo the scrutiny and critical friendships the participants had themselves been subject to. In addition were invited a few number of regional representatives that had participated in many workshops

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<sup>2</sup> Agenda in annex 2

Secondly, a survey<sup>3</sup> was sent out to the same 49 regions and countries asking for their reflections and perceptions of the impact and usefulness of the different elements in the three phases of the exercise and the overall outcome of the peer review. The deadline for responding to the survey was set a week before the stock-taking event in order to present the results and advance from these in the further discussions. The findings of the survey and the stock-taking event are presented in the following sections.

### **3. The survey**

In the survey, we asked the respondents to rate the usefulness of the three phases of the workshop (the preparation phase, the workshop itself and the feedback report delivered to the peer reviewed region or country after the workshop) on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest). We also asked what particularly made it useful/not useful and asked for a rating of different elements from each of the three phases. We encouraged the elaboration of other elements not suggested by us and asked how the different phases could be improved. The possibilities to comment freely were widely used by the respondents and gave interesting input reflected upon below.

The survey was designed online and a link was distributed by email to the representatives from all the 49 regions or Member States that had undergone the Peer Review exercise during 2012-2013. In the case there were more than one representative from each region, they were allowed to send individual answers, but which only one region did. We received a total of 26 responses from a total of 23 regions or Member States, giving a response rate of almost 50 %. In the following, the results are presented and reflected upon, aggregating the two highest scores of 4 and 5. The few answers of non-applicable (N/A) are taken out.

#### ***The preparation phase***

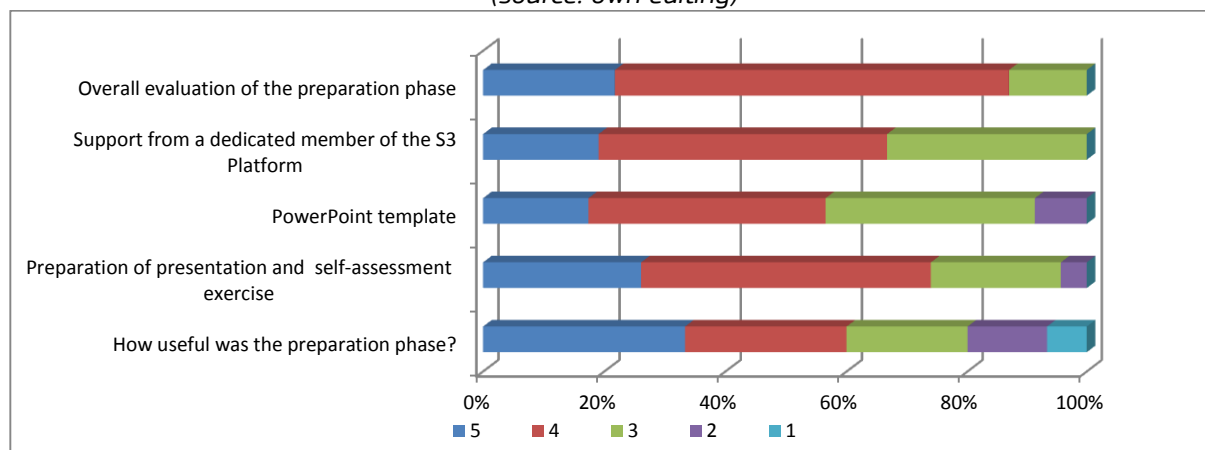
With regard to the preparation phase, we asked the participant about the usefulness of the self-assessment exercise, the presentation template and the support received from the dedicated S3 Platform member.

The answers in figure 1 depict that participants have been highly satisfied with the preparation phase of the workshop. As many as 87% of the respondents gave the overall evaluation of the preparation phase it a top score (5 or 4). 74 % of the respondents found the preparation of the presentation and the self-assessment exercise useful, 56 % indicated that the PowerPoint template was useful while 67% scored 5 or 4 to the support received from the dedicated S3 Platform member.

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<sup>3</sup> Survey in annex 3

*Figure 1: Evaluation of the preparation phase of the peer review workshops  
(source: own editing)*

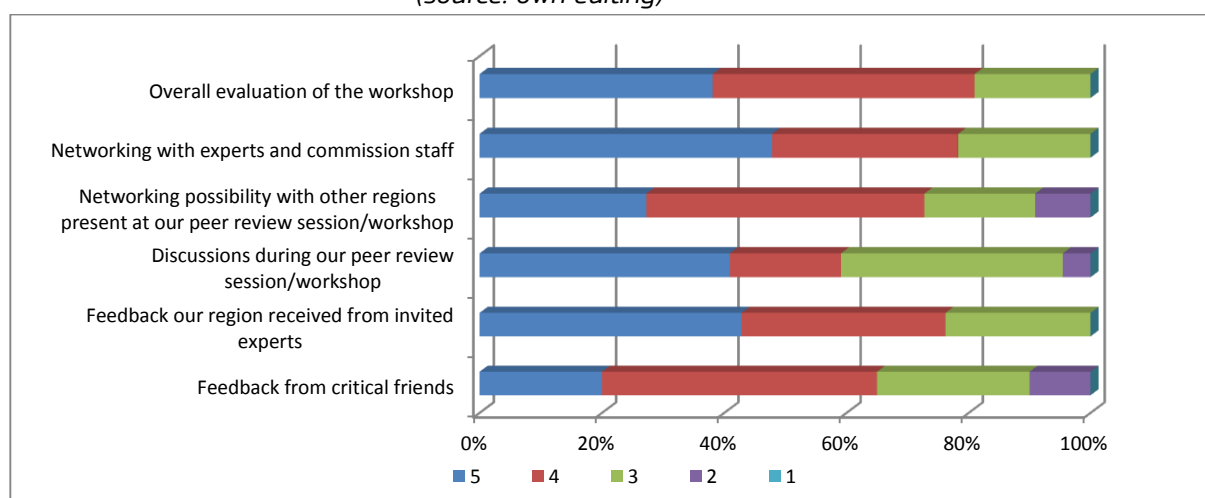


In the comments given in free text to the preparation phase, it is pointed out that the material and personal assistance provided throughout the preparation is an important motivating factor for better understanding the process, and for tapping into the collective knowledge and experience of previous workshop. This enhances dedication and involvement, which all serve as a basis for further a successful workshop.

### **The Peer Review Workshop**

Figure 2 below depicts the overall evaluation of the usefulness of the peer review event itself, including the opportunities throughout the event regarding networking with experts, commission staff, peers and the quality of discussions and feedback to the region from the respective groups of participants.

*Figure 2: Evaluation of the event  
(source: own editing)*



Interestingly respondents found that feedback from experts is more useful than feedback from peers. This may be due to their expert knowledge that made them be invited as experts in the first place, but it could also be rooted partly in the fact that the experts are given a role in the workshop which encourages them to be more proactive and to prepare better in order to give substantial

feedback to the regions or countries under review. Peers might be less prepared on the background and work of the reviewed regions, and also less prepared to take the role as a critical friend. The peers and experts are given a 30-45 minutes presentation of the regional/national RIS3 process, which has its limitation in terms of how deep the insight and basis for feedback can be. Preparations before the workshop can therefore be essential in relation to the quality of the feedback.

A related comment given from respondents is that representatives of the region under review sometimes feel their region is more advanced than the peer regions, hence the policy advice does not always feel very helpful. It might be the case that the most prepared or engaged regions volunteer for peer review, but it might also be that the level of reflections from the reviewed regions is much higher due to the relatively heavy preparation phase, while the peers might come rather unprepared to the workshop.

Other respondents underline the free and flexible discussions allowing strong and fruitful exchange of experience as very valuable for deeper self-reflections. The external views of own performance and the judgement of how far other regions are in the process give an important benchmarking.

Additional comments highlight the multiple workshops and the fact that peers return to later events which provides a network for peers that continues to grow and tighten, enabling valuable transnational learning. Some comment that the international network of peers allow them to share concerns with peers who really understand the issues at stake, since knowledge of RIS3 unfortunately is limited in home administration, giving isolation and the risk of becoming inward-looking to the core group in charge of the RIS3 process.

Nevertheless overall positive evaluation of the workshop, not all peer review sessions meet the expectations of the peer reviewed region. Questions asked by the region under review are sometimes perceived as unnecessary redefined by the peers, also away from its original intention, and sometimes attendance from peers might be lower than foreseen, for instance in afternoon sessions after lunch.

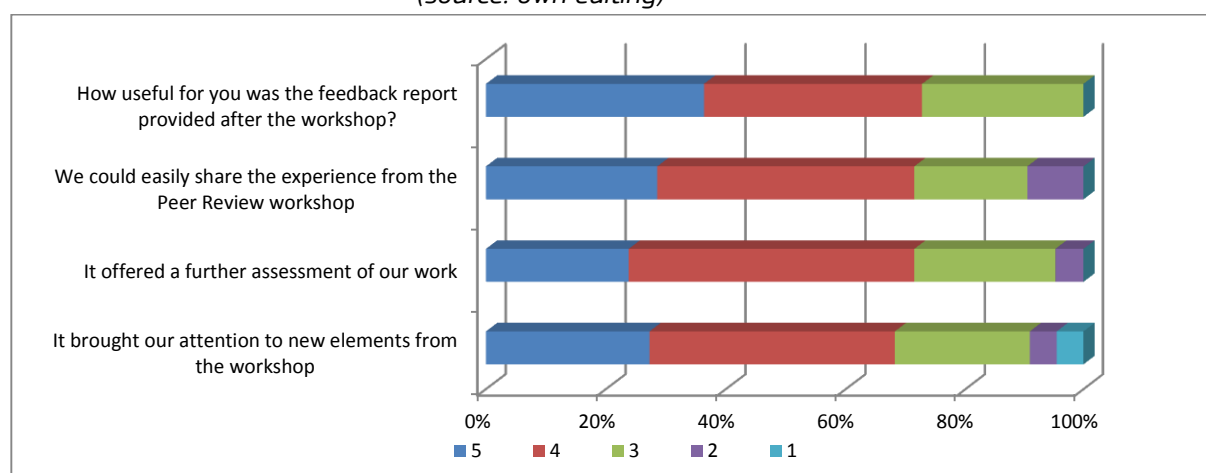
### **Feedback report**

The third part of the survey was intended to receive feedback on some aspects of the usefulness of the feedback report. All in all, the answers (figure 3) show with around 70 % of the respondents rating the usefulness 4 and 5, that the feedback report is perceived as very useful due to the further assessment offered of the RIS3 process, that it brought attention to new elements from the workshop and that the report made it easy to share experiences from the Peer Review Workshop. Not all regions undergoing review shared the feedback report with a wider audience. Some report they used it only internally to improve the development of the strategy; while others report that

they shared it widely with regional politicians, with other departments, and with cabinets of the ministers in charge.

An important remark made in the survey is related to the questionnaire used for self-assessment and assessment from peers and expert. It underlines that **this evaluation form is designed and intended for the evaluation of a document, while the regions under review describe a process still to be completed**. This is a valid and important remark, implying that the reader of the report should be made aware of exactly this, and read the evaluation as a hint to how far into the process one is perceived to have reached at the moment of the review.

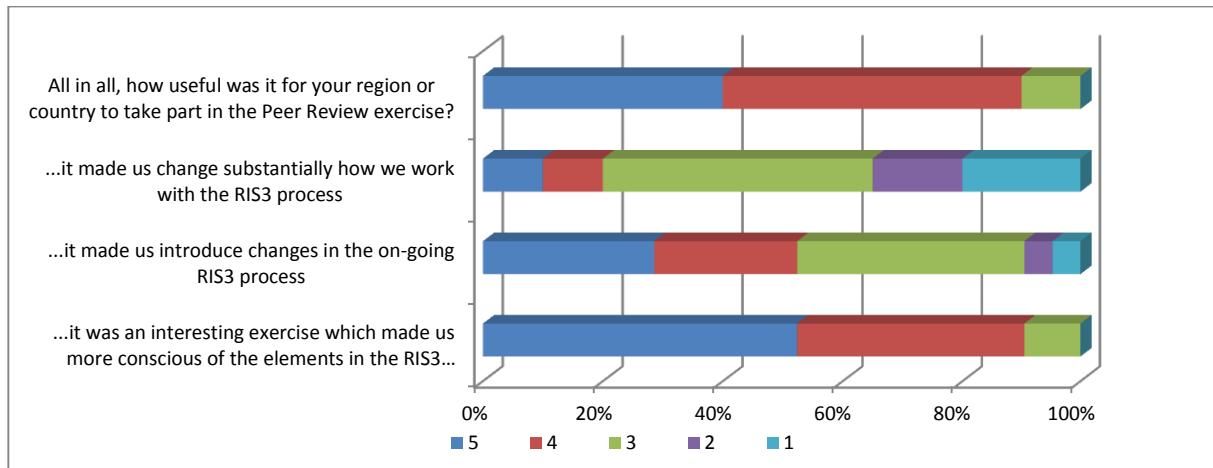
Figure 3: Evaluation of the feedback report  
(source: own editing)



### Overall

Finally, the S3 Platform asked the representatives of the peer reviewed regions and countries to rate the overall usefulness of taking part in the peer review exercise. Interestingly, as shown in figure 4, 90 % of the respondents rated the usefulness of the overall exercise with 5 and 4. On the other hand, only 20 % agreed that it made them *change substantially* how they work with the RIS3 process), even though over 50% confirm with that it made them *introduce changes* in the on-going work with the RIS3 process. Most importantly the exercise appears to be useful in terms of making the participants *more conscious* of the elements in the RIS3 process. One value of the exercise seems to have been to really understand *what Smart Specialisation is*. This might have been particularly the case in the early stage of workshop series and early stage of Smart Specialisation itself. The full awareness of what Smart Specialisation is, is a first step. Really understanding how to design and develop the process is the next step.

Figure 4: Evaluation of the peer review exercise  
(source: own editing)



## 4. The stock taking event

The stock-taking event itself was organised as a three hour afternoon workshop with about 20 participants from regional and national authorities and 7 participants from the S3 Platform. The participants had almost all presented their region or country in a previous peer review session, but only four of the participants represented regions that had answered the survey, and hence representing a widening of the voices heard. The workshop was organised around three core issues in order to *look back at the past workshops, collect individual stories about the impact of the peer review exercise and then look ahead for future development.*

Looking back at past workshops was done through an introduction<sup>4</sup> setting the scene with results from the survey, facts and figures from the 12 peer review workshops and reflections from the S3 platform. Stories about the impact of the peer review exercise were collected with an approach called 'appreciative inquiry'. The results were collected and clustered to map conditions and elements for good peer review exercise that should be taken into consideration for the future. In this mapping was included also the participants concluding reflections on the stock-taking event and further development of the events of the S3 Platform.

<sup>4</sup> <http://prezi.com/izucmvroj5ye/peer-review/>

Figure 5: Presentation of survey results



### Collecting stories of impact

The impact stories were collected with an approach often called appreciative inquiry (Hammond 1998). This approach allows you to bring out the positive or best elements of a situation or a story, and then pursue what could have made it even better. Our focus was not only to have the impact stories shared, but also to single out the elements that had made the difference and search for ways to improve even further the peer review methodology.

The participants were asked to form triads, taking 10 minutes turns each to interview each other allowing each of the three having the role of storyteller, interviewer and witness/storyteller. Each storyteller was asked the following three questions:

1. Tell what impact the peer review exercise has had in your region/country?
2. What made the impact good or special? (conditions)
3. Building on this good experience, what would you recommend to make it even better?

At the end of the day, 15 impact stories and the conditions for the impact had been told in the triads. In the search for the crucial elements that ensures impact in a peer review exercise, some of the stories were shared with all the participants in plenary.

The notes from the triads were left with the S3 Platform, and is shortly analysed in the following. The stories concentrate mainly on *the preparation phase* and the *networking and knowledge sharing during the workshop* even though also the feedback report is mentioned as important for the impact of the exercise.

The first set of stories highlights the preparation phase as important because it gave momentum and put innovation on the agenda in the region. The preparation for the workshop was a driving force forward with the RIS3 process itself and with *deadlines which provided discipline*. The self-

*assessment* is pointed out as having impact because it was genuine and gave good self-reflections and new knowledge, conditioned by the request of the S3 Platform to fill out the self-assessment wheel linked to the template for preparations. The preparation phase also *raised awareness* and *initiated dialogue* between different stakeholders. One story is about anticipated dialogue and decisions on who should be responsible for implementation of the strategy being taken before the workshop, again conditioned by the template asking for this specific information. Other stories are about *RIS3 analysis* being made as part of the preparatory phase in order to present for and discuss with the peers.

Other impact story stresses the *legitimacy* given by the whole exercise. It helped the representatives in charge to foster and achieve credibility from stakeholders and to engage them better, and thereby improving the whole RIS3 process. Preparing for the workshop gave the authority to go ahead and design and develop RIS3, it changed the view of thinking about the specialisations and gave both licence to say 'no' and discipline in the process.

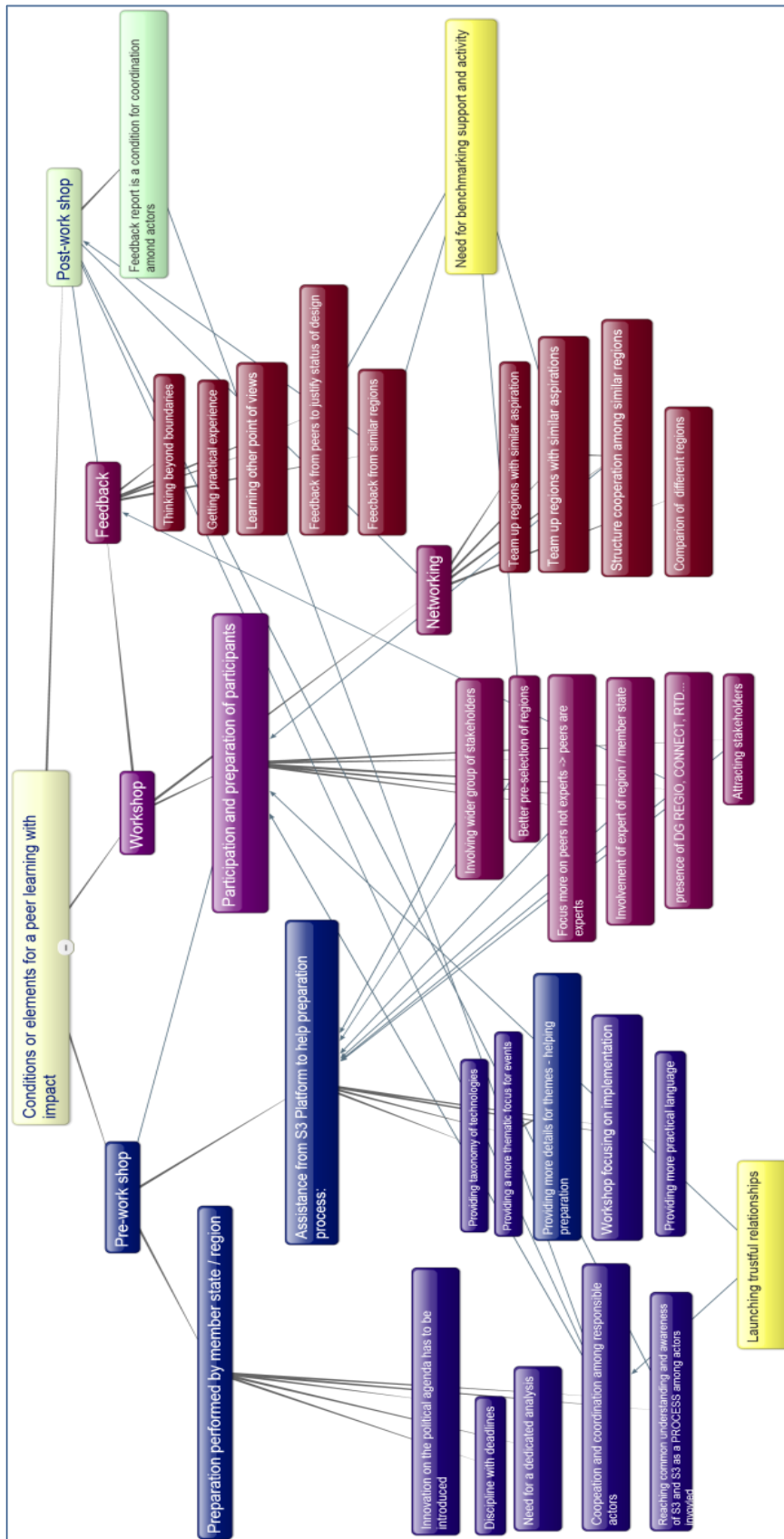
The second set of stories is about the networking and the knowledge sharing taking place during the workshops. These are dimensions of *mutual learning*, including the "knowing that the grass is not necessarily greener on the other side" is also an outcome, the need of sourcing-in knowledge and thinking from beyond own borders, and the value in listening to other countries and understanding how they have solved similar issues. Common feedback given in the peer review workshops, and underlined in the stories as valuable for impact, is the need *to focus much more on the definition of the priorities, to focus more on the relations between a technology and the fields of application and work on the implementation of the strategy*. The networking and knowledge sharing are reported to be conditioned by the *mixture of participants from different countries in the same event* that are giving the opportunity to exchange information, opinions and novel experiences. *The informal setting* is pointed out as important in developing trusted relationships with both peers and experts.

### **Mapping elements to bring forward**

In the concluding session of the workshop, the participants were asked to reflect upon the conditions and important elements of the peer review that were important for the exercise to have an impact. The mentioned elements were written down on individual pieces of paper and clustered in a common mind mapping session. Even though the conditions are interlinked, they were grouped related to (i) pre-workshop, (ii) workshop, (iii) feedback, and (iv) post-workshop. Opposing ideas are included and suggestions for further workshops are included. The final mind map with identified links is depicted in figure 6 on next page and the identified elements are included in the discussions in section 5 of this report.



Figure 6: Mind mapping session summary  
(source: own editing)



## 5. Reflection on findings and recommendations for further improvement

Survey and stock-taking event seen together give a good indication that the Peer Review workshops have had value for the participants. Table 1 below summarizes results from the survey, the collection of impact stories and the mind-mapping exercise. The table presents, according to the phases of the peer review exercise, the identified crucial elements to keep, the experiences of impact and usefulness these elements are perceived to have caused and the crucial elements and other suggestions which have been launched for further improvements.

*Table 1: Summarizing findings from survey and stock-taking event  
(source: own editing)*

Phases	Crucial elements to keep	Experiences of impact and usefulness	Elements for improvement and suggestions
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Template for presentation and deadlines</li> <li>Self-assessment tools</li> <li>Support from S3 Platform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Push RIS3 process forward</li> <li>+ Awareness raising</li> <li>+ Stakeholder engagement and dialogue</li> <li>+ Genuine self-assessments/reflections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Better preparation of peers</li> <li>- Less rigid template</li> <li>- Learn from experiences of previously reviewed regions</li> <li>- Pre-selection of peer regions?</li> <li>- Securement of sufficient support to region being peer reviewed</li> </ul>
Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participatory approach allowing group discussions</li> <li>Assessments by experts</li> <li>Informal and trusted environment</li> <li>International mix of peers</li> <li>Mix of peers, experts and EC staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Network growing and maturing as peers return to future workshops</li> <li>+ Peers truly understanding RIS3 issues at stake</li> <li>+ Valuable mutual transnational learning</li> <li>+ Feedback from experts and peers</li> <li>+ Benchmarking own status against development of other regions</li> <li>+ Give stress on priorities and implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Include advice from regions more advanced than region under review</li> <li>- More time for free discussion</li> <li>- Secure attendance in afternoon sessions</li> <li>- Consistency between original and rephrased question</li> <li>- Thematic workshop with similar methodology</li> <li>- Involve DGs and DG appointed experts for regions</li> <li>- Structure cooperation among similar regions</li> </ul>
Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feedback reports including further assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Give legitimacy</li> <li>+ Basis for further Internal/External Dissemination</li> <li>+ Give attention to new elements</li> <li>+ Further assessment</li> <li>+ Further follow up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Follow up of region after peer review from S3 Platform</li> <li>- Feedback on process or product?</li> <li>- Targeted use of feedback report in region to reach common understanding and cooperation among actors</li> </ul>

It is suggested to improve the preparation phase with a *better preparation of the region undergoing review* in terms of understanding how the peer review workshop will be conducted and by tapping into previous experience from other regions. With better understanding of the concept, it will be easier for the region which is going to be reviewed to prepare targeted material and presentation. The *template* used to prepare the presentation in the peer review session is perceived by some as too rigid without room for adaption. At the same time, it is recognised that a standard and structured approach even on the time to be devoted to each topic might be needed in order to ensure the audience with the needed level of background information to act as a valuable critical friends. The template has undergone several changes from the first workshops, taking into account previous experiences and also the pace of the evolution of the RIS3 processes, giving for instance heavier emphasis on analysis in the first workshops, and more emphasis on implementation in the later workshops, challenging the region to not spent too much time on past steps but rather get input and policy advice to topics they are facing at the moment of the peer review.

Crucial elements to keep and suggestions for improvements are sometimes overlapping. For instance is it not hard to understand that the *support from the S3 Platform* has not been identical in 49 different sessions and that maybe the interaction with the S3 Platform prior to the workshop not always has been optimal. The support depends both on the proactive role of the dedicated S3 Platform members to support in the process of preparation and on the demand and openness from the region to take advantage of the support offered, but maybe not always insisted upon. The support will normally consist of feedback on prepared presentation and formulation of questions for peers to discuss and leveraging expectations. The evolution of the workshops has been a learning process also for the S3 Platform staff, understanding over time how best to prepare a region. The staff of the Platform has grown since the first workshop, bringing new and different expertise to the organization of the events allowing a total of 14 staff members offering support to at least one region and contributing in at least one workshop during 2012-2013. The elements for improvements in the preparation phase presented in the table suggest that the S3 Platform must ensure that all team members know why and how to support regions and countries undergoing peer review, being carriers of past region's experiences.

It is also suggested that in addition to the support from the S3 Platform, the concept of peer reviewing could be taken one step further, allowing *peers to assist and support each other* also in the preparation phase of the workshop. In connecting the four regions or countries to be reviewed even before a workshop, and encourage them to jointly prepare the presentations, would give them more input and grounds for reflections in the preparation phase. It could also create a community and network between them which could give an increased sensation of trust and confidence already before the workshop, hopefully visible and transferred so to increase the openness and mutual learning for all participants.

Another dimension for improvement is *how to prepare the critical friends better or differently* in order for them to give better feedback and policy advice. Better prepared peers depend on available material for preparation, which again depend on the regions undergoing peer review respecting deadlines and providing information and draft presentations early enough to be distributed to the critical friends prior to the workshop. In the last instance, even if both these two aspects improved, the critical friends would also need to take the responsibility to take the time and effort to go through available information and meet prepared for the workshops.

Peers do not agree to whether experts give more useful feedback than peers, or if peers are the real experts due to their more practical experience and solutions to offer. As expert feedback is perceived by some as more useful than feedback from peers, an option is to invite more experts to the workshops. One suggestion appearing in the survey is to invite the RIS3 expert assigned by DG REGIO to assess a region or country to be present at the session of the equivalent regional or national peer review. To keep a balance between peers and experts is nevertheless important as peers might withdraw from contributing with their questions and input if the sessions are too dominated by experts, lowering the crucial mutual learning for all participants.

Another dimension there is no obvious answer to, is whether the selections of regions or countries to be peer reviewed and the critical friends to review them, should be based on similar level of advancement in design and development of RIS3, or not. Peers are keen to learn from each other, but who will give better advice; peers from similar or very different countries/cultures in terms of economic or social means or of similar or different level of advancement in the design of RIS3 strategies? Some regions tend to call for regions similar to them, but the answer is not given, key insights are sometimes collected from dialogue between regions that would not be perceived as having much in common.

Facilitation and *moderation of the S3 Peer Review workshops* is based on a methodology developed over the two years. The region under review is asked to prepare questions for the critical friends to discuss. The critical friends are then asked to rephrase the questions in order to commonly understand what they really are discussing, and in order to get to the underlying questions or the root cause of the policy issue at stake. This rephrasing sometimes bring very good results and new approaches not at first visible for the region in question. But it might also alter the intended objective for advice, not answering the need of the region under review but rather reflects the interests of the participants for further discussions. Sometimes this rephrasing might even be a sign of conflicting opinions or perspectives of what is important or at stake. The S3 Platform needs to be concisions about this danger and have a flexible approach to this point in the methodology.

It is a hard task to please all participants of a workshop and dynamics among participants varies among workshops, sessions and tables. Some peers prefer the free discussion, allowing the pursuing of own interests; others prefer more structure and are dedicated to give proper policy

advice to the region under review. The S3 Platform tries to accommodate for both by structuring well the peer review sessions, but ensuring space and time over coffee, lunch and dinner for the free discussion.

Thematic peer review workshops are suggested and proposed, but experience from the platform in 2014 indicates that most regions requesting to be peer reviewed still need and prefer the general peer review going through all the six steps of the RIS3. On the other hand, when regions do feel they could benefit from more focused events, the S3 Platform organizes thematic workshops in addition to general peer review workshops. As the countries and regions of Europe proceed with the RIS3 processes, topics like implementation and monitoring will be uttermost timely to discuss in a trustful community among peers with the same notion of challenges to be faced. This could be done almost within the existing methodology of Peer Review Workshop or in a modified workshop format for mutual learning and/or collaboration.

The *international network and mutual learning* of the Peer Review events should not be underestimated as an outcome with a potential long-term impact in terms of looking outside of own borders for experiences and expertise. Networking, meeting peers and experts has been mentioned as one of the key advantages of the events. An outsider's perspective can be an important enabler for understanding ourselves (Mariussen, Midtkandal and Rakhmatullin, 2014), followed by important key insights that can foster better performance at home in their design and development of the RIS3. A significant number of peers do return to later events, nurturing the informal atmosphere and strengthening the community of peers. Peers do face similar challenges, but offer different solutions. In this lie the great essence of mutual learning in RIS3, not offering a one size fits all solution, but encouraging place based approaches and unique and innovative ways of facing the future. A challenge for the S3 Platform would be to keep this trusted community of practice alive, and still offer renewal and create interest for further participation.

### ***Some possible limitations***

This working paper summarizes the feedback some regions and countries have transmitted to the S3 Platform through a survey and a stock-taking event for the regions and countries that were peer reviewed during 2012 – 2013. The feedback concerning the usefulness of the exercise and the impact it has had is to a large extent positive.

One can claim that the elements we have found important for the success of the workshop are the same elements we named and asked for a rating of, and hence losing out on elements nobody has been conscious about. As this might be true, the S3 Platform team chose these elements particularly because they were the elements we could control to a certain degree and considered modifying. Hence the feedback has had value, giving us unexpected feedback.

The number of respondents to the survey and the number of participants in the workshop is not very high, even though the S3 Platform is quite satisfied with the response and attendance given a short notice in a busy month of the year and that Seville is not easily accessible from the rest of Europe. One could imagine that this auto-selected group of respondents on average is more positive and engaged than the members of the S3 Platform that did not respond or attended the workshop. Nevertheless, the two groups overlap by only four regions and together represent almost 70 % of the all peer reviewed regions and countries, giving a certain confidence that we can trust the findings as input for future development.

A remark about the findings is that the regions having responded the survey or attended the workshop represent all of the 12 workshops organized. As the workshops and the methodology have evolved during the two years, they have inevitably not had exactly the same kind of exercise, which might give both contrasting findings and suggestions for improvements which might have already been taken into account.

## 6. Conclusions and way forward

In this report we have presented findings from a survey and a stock-taking event, both targeted at collecting feedback on the usefulness and impact of the first 12 peer review workshops organized by the S3 Platform in 2013 and 2104. We have collected experiences from the regions and countries that have presented their RIS3 processes for peer review along the different elements of the developed methodology.

An overall aim has been to understand better the value added of the Peer Review exercises. It could have been done through an external evaluation, but the S3 Platform chose to use a participatory approach and dialogue along the lines of what it advocates to the RIS3 stakeholders. The directions and suggestions for the future events are then taken in closer collaboration with the members of the platform, the beneficiaries of future events, ensuring a bottom up approach.

The results from the survey show an overwhelmingly positive response on the usefulness of the peer review exercise. The stock-taking event gave us real stories of impact and the two together gave many constructive suggestions for improvement and further activities. While the findings show that the Peer Review Workshops have proven useful in understanding and disseminating *what is* Smart Specialisation in practice, only limited changes are introduced in the RIS3 processes after the review, hence pointing to limited impact on the *know how* of the RIS3.

For the future, the S3 Platform could build on these experiences, but move from the *know what* of Smart Specialisation to *know why* (improving the analysis) and *know how* (improving the implementation) in order to assist regions in implementations, monitoring and evaluation, refinement and adjustments of the strategies.

The S3 Platform has from February to July 2014 organised four new workshops, out of which three have been accommodating for national authorities to be peer reviewed. Several of the recommendations and suggestions for improvement discussed in this paper have been tried in one or several of these four workshops. Other workshops organised by the S3 Platform also benefit from the collected experiences, most of them being highly participatory with strong emphasis of learning together and collaborating across Europe.

The new programming period started in 2014, and the Strategies for Smart Specialisation need to be implemented. Building on experiences of the first years of S3 Workshops, objectives for future peer review workshops should be related to upcoming challenges in this endeavour. RIS3 is not only a strategy, but a process that needs constant governance, stakeholder involvement, monitoring and evaluation and updated analysis that might alter the priorities or the mix of policies in order to reach the agreed objectives or move towards the region's vision.

Time itself is a scarce commodity. The S3 Platform has developed the Peer Review workshops and the Peer Review Methodology in a way that would allow a high number of regions to undergo the exercise and an even higher number of regions to take part in the mutual learning. A question is whether there are more efficient ways or forums that could help share ideas, questions and feedback – and in effective ways have impact on how RIS3 is being carried onwards in the regions and member states of Europe.

One of the intentions of the S3 Platform is to continue the community and network based on trust and honest dialogue, and to develop the work of the Platform in a bottom up fashion in close dialogue with its growing number of members. With this aim and the expanding focus of its activities, all organized events should be efficient and useful for the participants. To ensure this, a system of receiving feedback from peer reviewed regions and member states has to be developed in an institutionalized way allowing the results, let it be results of surveys or any type of other means, to be built in to the future activities and methodologies used by the S3 Platform. This way, the further evolution of the activities and services of the S3 Platform will stay in touch with its members, allowing a bottom up development in pace with the regions and member states of Europe's progress in policy for research and innovation.

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## Annex 1: Peer reviewed Member States and Regions (2012-2013-mid 2014)

Where and when	Peer-reviewed Member States / Regions
Seville, January 2012	Friesland (NL) Nord/Pas-de-Calais (FR) Basque Country (ES) West (RO)
Seville, May 2012	Northern Ireland (UK) Apulia (IT) Scania (SE) Walloon Region (BE)
Ponta Delgada, June 2012	Cornwall (UK) Réunion (FR) Canary Islands (ES) Azores (PT)
Pisa, September 2012	Tuscany (IT) Centre (FR) Satakunta (FI)
Strasbourg, December 2012	Alsace (FR) Attica (GR) Bratislava Region (SK) Emilia-Romagna (IT)
Palma de Mallorca, February 2013	Balearic Islands (ES) Lapland (FI) Marche (IT) Pomorskie (PO) Aragón (ES)
Brno, March 2013	Southern Moravia Region (CZ) Świętokrzyskie (PO) Wales (UK) Saxony (DE)
Vaasa, May 2013	Ostrobothnia (FI) Lubelskie (PO) Languedoc-Roussillon (FR) Piedmont (IT)
Budapest, June 2013	Hungary Republic of Malta Republic of Lithuania Portuguese Republic
Faro, July 2013	Algarve (PT) Kujawsko-Pomorskie (PO) Rhône-Alpes (FR) Sicily (IT)
Heraklion, September 2013	Castile and León (ES) Crete (GR) Moravian-Silesian Region (CZ) Nordland (NO) Umbria (IT)
Potsdam, November 2013	Berlin-Brandenburg (DE) Mazowieckie (PL) Greater Manchester (UK) Prague Capital Region (CZ)
Riga, February 2014	Latvia Czech Republic Estonia England
Novi Sad, April 2014	Vojvodina (RS) Northeast Romania (RO) Weser-Ems (DE)
Portoroz, May 2014	Croatia Cyprus Slovenia
Dublin, July 2014	Ireland Slovakia Romania Bulgaria Poland

## Annex 2: Agenda for Stock-taking day



# Stock-taking workshop Two years of Peer Review and developing RIS3 Now what?

Sevilla, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013, 15.30-18.00

**European Commission, JRC-IPTS, S3Platform**  
**Calle Inca Garcilaso, 3, Edificio Expo, 41092 Sevilla, Spain**  
**Room A30 (first floor)**

15:30 – 16:00	<b><u>Introduction by S3 Platform</u></b> <i>Alessandro Rainoldi, Action Leader of the S3 Platform</i> <b>Two years of Peer Review Workshops : facts, figures and impressions from the Platform</b> <b>Looking ahead: Nurturing a community of practice from 2014</b>
16:00 – 16:30	<b><u>Check-in</u></b> All participants in a circle: what potentials do you see for the peer review or peer coaching in the future?
16:30 – 17:30 (including break)	<b><u>Appreciative Inquiry</u></b> Impact stories <b>1. Tell what impact the peer review exercise has had in your region/country?</b> <b>2. What made the impact good or special? (conditions)</b> <b>3. Building on this good experience, what would you recommend to make it even better?</b>
17:30 – 18:00	<b><u>Collection and clustering of main findings from the triads.</u></b> Collective mind map
18:00 – 18:30	<b><u>Check out – in two words</u></b> Share your reflection from today
18:30	<b>Cocktail reception</b>

Find more information <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu> or contact the S3 Platform [JRC-IPTS-S3PLATFORM@ec.europa.eu](mailto:JRC-IPTS-S3PLATFORM@ec.europa.eu)

## Annex 3: Survey for Peer reviewed Member States / Regions



### Experience from Peer Review Exercise

Dear Colleague,

Over the last two years, the S3 Platform has organised a total of 12 Peer Review workshops. Over 45 regions and four member states have been peer reviewed during these events. Our peer review methodology has evolved substantially and a few new elements (evaluation forms, focus on lessons learned etc.) have been introduced since the first workshop held in Seville in January 2012.

We are currently planning our future activities of the S3 Platform, and feel it would be important for us to learn about your experiences with our peer review workshops and the impact of the actual review exercise on your region's or country's RIS3 process.

We would like to thank you for taking the time to fill in this short form and sharing your reflections with us. None of the fields in this survey are compulsory but you will be able to elaborate on individual issue if you would like to do so. Please note that all individual responses will be kept confidential and will only be used to guide and improve our future activities.

Thank you!  
The S3 Platform Team

Questions marked with an asterisk \* require an answer to be given.

### INFORMATION

1) Your Name

2) Country / Region that has been peer reviewed:

### IMPACT AND USEFULNESS OF THE PEER REVIEW EXERCISE

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest and 5 the highest score, please rate the following dimensions

3.1) How useful was the preparation phase (including the preparation of your region's presentation and its self-assessment) of the Peer Review exercise for you personally?

- a: 5
- b: 4
- c: 3
- d: 2
- e: 1
- f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.2) Which of the following made it particularly useful/not useful?

- a: 5
- b: 4
- c: 3
- d: 2
- e: 1
- f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
a) The internal discussions we had in our region during the preparation of our PowerPoint presentation and the self-assessment exercise	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) The PowerPoint template prepared by the S3 Platform	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) The support from a dedicated member of the S3 Platform	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) Other reasons (please elaborate below)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please elaborate here:

3.3) How can the preparation phase be improved?

4.1) How useful was the actual workshop for you as a policymaker?

- a: 5
- b: 4
- c: 3
- d: 2
- e: 1
- f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4.2) Which of the following made it particularly useful/not useful?

a: 5

b: 4

c: 3

d: 2

e: 1

f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
a) The feedback our region received from its critical friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) The feedback our region received from invited experts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) The discussions during our peer review session/workshop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) The networking possibility with other regions present at our peer review session/workshop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e) The networking with experts and commission staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f) Other (please elaborate below)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please elaborate here:

4.3) Why and how was it useful/not useful? *(Please elaborate)*

5.1) How useful for you was the feedback report provided by the S3 Platform staff after the workshop?

a: 5  
b: 4  
c: 3  
d: 2  
e: 1  
f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5.2) Which of the following made it particularly useful/not useful?

a: 5

b: 4

c: 3

d: 2

e: 1

f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
a) It brought our attention to new elements from the workshop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) It offered a further assessment of our work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) We could easily share the experience from the Peer Review workshop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) Other (please elaborate below)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please elaborate here:

5.3) With whom did you share the feedback-report?



5.4) How can the feedback-report be improved?

6.1) All in all, how useful was it for your region or country to take part in the Peer Review exercise?

- a: 5
- b: 4
- c: 3
- d: 2
- e: 1
- f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6.2) Which of the following made it particularly useful/not useful?

- a: 5
- b: 4
- c: 3
- d: 2
- e: 1
- f: Not applicable

	a	b	c	d	e	f
a) All in all, it was an interesting exercise which made us more conscious of the elements in the RIS3 process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) All in all, it made us introduce changes in the on-going RIS3 process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) All in all, it made us change substantially how we work with the RIS3 process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) Other (please elaborate)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please elaborate here:

6.3)Howt can the Peer Review exercise be improved (if not already mentioned)?

## RATING OF THE S3 PLATFORM

7.1) All in all, how satisfied are you with the S3 Platform and its activities

a: 5

b: 4

c: 3

d: 2

e: 1

f: Not applicable

a

b

c

d

e

f



7.2) Comments:

## Feedback

8) Any other reflections or feedback you would like to share?

We thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Now simply click on "Submit" and your answers will reach us.

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#### **Abstract**

While advocating that the Smart Specialisation is a process in which the bottom up involvement of stakeholders is crucial, the S3 Platform has from 2012 organised a number of informal Peer Review workshops in which peers from all across Europe, experts and Commission Staff have given feedback and policy advice to regions and countries that have presented their ongoing process of designing and developing RIS3. This paper is a technical report of experiences and perceived impact from the regions and countries which were reviewed in the first twelve Peer Review Workshops during 2012 and 2013. The findings and reflections presented were produced in a survey and a stock-taking event being organised in November and December 2013 and are discussed in relation to further development of the work of the S3 Platform.

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