



EU-CONEXUS Research For Society

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EU-CONEXUS RFS – ERA policy brief

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ERA POLICY BRIEF

CALL: H2020-IBA-SwafS-Support-1-2020

TOPIC: IBA-SwafS-Support-1-2020

Support for the Research and Innovation Dimension of European Universities (Part I)

PROJECT: EU-CONEXUS RESEARCH FOR SOCIETY. <https://www.eu-conexus.eu/en/>

In this policy brief, the European Universities pilot alliances report on the progress made through cooperation in selected R&I areas and provide a first set of recommendations to the European Commission for further policy development.

Policy background:

In order to strengthen strategic partnerships across the EU amongst higher education institutions, the European Commission targets the emergence of “European Universities” by 2024 by funding alliances from across Europe. The ambitious mandate aims to trigger systemic, structural and sustainable institutionalized cooperation between higher education institutions. As a complement to the Erasmus+ action geared towards supporting higher education cooperation models, Horizon 2020 support is dedicated to contributing to the research and innovation dimension of the alliances between European universities, in line with their shared, integrated, long-term joint strategy and in synergy with their education dimension.

This initiative is one of the flagships of the [European strategy for universities](#) that aims at supporting and enabling universities to adapt to changing conditions, to thrive and to take a leading role in the recovery of Europe, and in making our society greener, more inclusive and more digital. The adoption of this strategy was accompanied by a Commission [proposal for a Council recommendation on building bridges](#) for effective European higher education cooperation.

In parallel, the [European Research Area Policy Agenda](#) sets out 20 voluntary actions for the period 2022-2024, including several of which are relevant for universities. The feedback from the alliances will help co-shape the design and implementation of the ERA Policy Agenda 2022 – 2024, such as ERA actions 1 (sharing of data), 3 (reform of research management), 4 (strengthening careers), 5 (gender equality), 7 (knowledge valorisation), 8 (research infrastructures), 13 (empowering universities), 14 (engaging citizens), 15 (role in R&I ecosystem), 17 (research management capacity).

Methodology

The European Commission presented structured questions divided into 2 blocks: (1) Feedback on progress and (2) Policy recommendations. To provide the European Commission with relevant answers the questions were forwarded to the all EU-CONEXUS RFS working packages, which were expected to give specific answers regarding the problem areas relevant to their specific tasks and activities. Individual responses from the working package representatives have been also considered as reflecting view of a corresponding partner university. After collecting and structuring received responses, all working groups/packages were invited to the final reading. The consolidated EU-CONEXUS ERA Policy Brief maintains the structure that has been provided by European Commission.

This methodology helped to create an unobtrusive document based on open answers, reflecting the experience and views of the Alliance members.

FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS (MAX 1.5P)

- 1. Please describe the challenges your Alliance encountered regarding cooperation between universities in the field of R&I in relation to the institutional change areas (transformation modules) foreseen.**

- (1) developing a common research and innovation agenda and action plan (EU-CONEXUS RFS-WP2 - Science and Innovation Agenda and positioning in the ERA)**

Research management systems are highly diverse between Universities in Europe and management data cannot be shared easily also due to the difficulty to establish a common research information system. A lack of common research culture between institutions and also between disciplines significantly inhibits trustful and efficient cooperation.

The difference in internal structuration between Alliance member institutions led to a delayed understanding of the overall diversity of the Alliance research, spread of existing human resources and complexity of available infrastructure. Furthermore, differences in understanding of the terms used such as “calls for projects”, “participation in bodies”, “public-private partnerships”, etc., lead to comparison difficulties between partners. Building direct contacts between key researchers was highly important to engage with each other and form thematic research groups around SmUCS. Due to the pandemic at the beginning of the project period, researchers’ mobility was low and only a few physical meetings could be organized. New and top-down created joint researchers workgroups suffered from low participation because of the lack of mutual knowledge of the partner universities in the specific fields of R&I.

With regard to the creation of the Joint Research Area with a common research agenda, it has also become apparent that major differences in legal, financial, and national frameworks for research and innovation lead to difficulties in constructing common policies and common proposals with specific details (e.g. budgets).

- (2) strengthening human capital, enabling balanced brain circulation and gender balance (EU-CONEXUS RFS WP3 - Strengthening socially responsible management and development of human resources and Resources)**

The main challenge of this WP is to harmonize the different human resources management cultures of the participating universities. This work package is working on the implementation of a common human resource policy, accelerating the application for HRS4R award by individual universities, and implementing uniform human resources quality measures at each university.

- (3) sharing research infrastructures and other resources (EU-CONEXUS RFS WP4 - Research Infrastructures and Resources)**

The development of adequate information and data management systems or other platforms is highly complex, costly, and currently unavailable at the Alliance level.

With a view to creating Joint Research Infrastructures and adjusting corresponding procurement procedures, a common protocol and facilitated information exchange through an open and easily accessible platform would be necessary, along with the long-term vision and funding perspective.

Up to now, the EU-CONEXUS Access Policy has been developed based on the “European Charter for Access to Research Infrastructures”, but important issues still depend on the policy of each university.

(4) reinforcing cooperation with non-academic actors, esp. academia-business cooperation

Due to the differences in the experiences and practices in knowledge transfer processes management at partner universities, the functions of R&I management personnel, whether these are TTO professionals or academic representatives, need to be better defined and applied to the networking within the innovation ecosystem.

(5) mainstreaming of comprehensive Open Science practices and involvement of citizens, civil society, and public/cities authorities in research and innovation

The challenges for the implementation of open science practices are related to the lack of common understanding of all partners of the subject and activities planned. Coming from different scientific fields, researchers have different views of what open sciences mean in their scientific disciplines.

(6) monitoring and promoting research integrity and ethics (Research Integrity Committee)

The committee collected guidelines on good research practices from alliance members and has developed a “Research and Innovation code of conduct regarding research integrity”. Good progress was made in disseminating guidelines and policy principles.

(7) promoting gender equality

The differences in the advancement of the partner institutions regarding the implementation of institutional structures and organizational procedures for the promotion of gender equality inhibit a harmonized implementation of a joint gender policy corresponding to the jointly developed Gender Equality Plan at the Alliance level.

2. Please describe how you tackled or intend to tackle these challenges. Based on your project’s experience so far (and if applicable), briefly outline case(s) that you consider as good practice and of interest to other universities or to policy-makers.

1. By using Alliance partners’ good practices that have recently started to show tangible impact, we will try to tackle the challenge of getting researchers in touch with each other. As much as the finances will allow we will establish round tables, workshops, open conferences, seminars, research days and other direct communication and dissemination activities, dedicated to R&I aspects for improving common knowledge and developing core links within the research community.
Job shadowing mobilities for relevant supportive administrative structures (e.g. Ph.D. school organizers, project development offices) help in developing integrated activities for researchers.
2. In-person meetings and thematic conferences are highly valuable for the acceleration of collaboration projects and joint activities. These important deliberations among researchers have, for example, taken place at the scientific workshop organised in Athens in June 2022. A significant number of researchers representing the various disciplines from all partner universities met for the first time and discussed future activities within a research group with the future perspective to create Joint Research Areas on SmUCS themes.
3. Specific trainings are identified and proposed to partner institutions in order to promote progress in developing and implementing gender policies at the institutional level that are in line with the joint Gender Equality Plan.

4. Diverse profiles of representatives in WP5 (Knowledge Transfer and Innovation), allowed collation and analysis of good practices at the institutional rather than on the WP level, i.e. the involvement of local professionals (lawyers, etc.) was essential for complexity and reliability of findings.

3. Please describe the tangible progress that individual partners, as well as the Alliance as a whole, have made in terms of introducing changes in their entities as a result of this project. Please elaborate on whether the inclusive and integrated cooperation approach of your alliance helps accelerate institutional change of all partners (e.g. through sharing of practices from institutions with strong expertise or infrastructure in specific areas to institutions without).

The exchange of best practices, the networking of researchers, and the attempt to use common infrastructures have led to the restructuring and strengthening of some structures (connected with gender equality, the R&I code of conduct and ethics, etc.). As a result of the work on a joint Gender Equality Plan, one partner introduced a new department on gender and diversity issues.

Another successful example of a transfer of knowledge within the Alliance is the cooperation in preparing for the application for the HRS4R award. One partner, which has already gone through the process, was able to efficiently guide other partners in their strategic planning and adaptation to the demands of the award.

Another tangible progress of our Alliance in the field of knowledge transfer is the development of an Innovation Hub and a virtual platform for R&I resource management and knowledge transfer issues. The implementation of the Hub concept is at an early stage, but various Hub elements are under development to create synergies of expertise and contribute to the widening of the action fields for researchers, students, and stakeholders.

Cooperation in the WP3 (Strengthening socially responsible management and development of human resources and Resources) has made it possible to generate recommendations in relation to research and the internationalization of young researchers, which has materialized, among other actions, in the programme of the PhD Summer Schools. This initiative has accelerated not only the mobility of doctoral students, the creation of new contact and collaboration networks but also fruitful meetings between senior researchers from different universities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (MAX 3P)

In this section, the European Universities pilot Alliances make recommendations in relation to the policy topics identified below. Given the unique strengths and focus of each European University Alliances, please focus only on those aspects of most relevance to your case. Please feel free as well to expand to other policy topics you may wish to share your learnings and recommendations (other recommendations).

Policy topic 1: facilitating transnational cooperation

- **Knowing that the Commission proposed a [Council recommendation to facilitate transnational collaboration between universities](#), which action should be prioritised to address the challenges you encountered as an Alliance in sharing capacities, infrastructures, resources, or staff in R&I?**

Support of a common reference framework for research with appropriate tools

The way research activities are carried out, the way they are financed and the status of researchers are among the many elements that appear to be very different between the partners from different countries. A common European framework that would align practices would allow for simpler interactions between researchers, whether in terms of setting up projects, supporting mobility during their careers, professional development, etc.

Support of a European approach for Joint doctoral frameworks

There is a lack of alignment in the legislation on joint doctorates in the different countries, which makes it currently impossible to offer joint doctorates in European consortia. We believe that this step is key to launching a real grassroots research strategy, which would accelerate cooperation and the establishment of a real European policy.

Sustainable long-term funding

The Alliance sees the need for sustainable, long-term funding which includes also the support of thematic research projects (specific for the Alliance), in order to strengthen the Alliance specialization, as well as internal co-operation/development; supporting research infrastructure development, and associated training.

Policy topic 2: strengthening careers

- **Is there a need to develop a model tenure-track system at European level to contribute to solving precariousness of early career researchers? If you believe so, how do you think it should be structured?**

The coordination of a European tenure track system in addition to the models set up in some European countries (France / Germany / Netherlands) might be a challenge.

On the other hand, the precariousness of the careers of young researchers is a reality. The establishment of a shared European tenure track strategy would be a wise initiative. There is a significant lack of opportunities and abandonment of talented young people due to precariousness and lack of stability. Some countries experience a significant brain-drain when young researchers are going abroad, looking for better employment conditions and career perspectives due to an unmotivated political system, non-competitive research payment practices, outdated research infrastructure and other reasons. There is also a need to support young researchers in getting access to grants (insufficient funding/number of grants available – including the high differences in their distribution).

- **In light of the [policy process on the reform of assessment](#) of research and institutions, what are your recommendations on how to address academic/researcher career assessment?**

A common European framework would be useful to assess researcher careers. Career assessment should be transformed according to new merits: collaboration, transdisciplinarity, support to young researchers, the action of scientific mediation, leadership in research groups, and thesis direction. Publication alone should not be valued, as it leads to a lack of incentives to promote and help young talents, who need the support of senior researchers. It would be the first step to the setting status of European researchers. Then European and international experience (mobilities, teaching, etc.) of researchers should be taken into account for their career development.

Furthermore, the focus on research assessment should not be only on grants but on technical/ industrial / society / economic market projects as well. For teachers-researchers (enseignant-chercheurs) more focus should be put on their education/academic activities. As for now their research activities are predominant in their assessment, and the education tends to become less and less important, leading to a decrease in the corresponding career level.

There should be a special focus on balancing 1) academic work load (lecturing); 2) fundamental research (publications, research projects), and 3) applied research/university-industry cooperation (contract research, services).

The development of HRS4R strategies at the level of all partner institutions and their clear and active implementation will lead to a harmonization of criteria for assessment of researchers and a strengthening of the careers of both, young and experienced scientists. The mechanisms and criteria for linking the selection of scientists and other members of working teams will be more uniform and in line with general European guidelines and recommendations. These mechanisms must be implemented at all levels and in all institutions.

Furthermore, the implementation of a research and innovation information system will help getting a better overview of the performance of individual scientists and individual institutions.

Policy topic 3: digital transition

- **What are the specific needs of the alliances to accelerate their digital transition in the R&I dimension, and how can this be addressed at the EU level?**

There is still a lack of hardware (e.g. servers) and specialized staff for the normal level of operation, before talking e.g. HPC (high-performance computing). There is a need for the creation of specific R&I open databases, and also support/development of open science procedures/results/software.

Digitization is a process that concerns the activities of all higher education institutions including European university alliances. Within the EU-CONEXUS project, the plan is to develop a RIIS system that would digitize equipment and research systems. But in the area of digitization and the development of a system that connects all partners or Alliances, additional investment is needed.

At the national level, the implementation of digitalization in some countries is planned, which would refer to the strengthening of network infrastructure and related content digitization services. A coherent approach across Europe for digitization and interoperability would significantly facilitate cooperation and integration at the transnational level. It would be very useful to have common digital systems in order to share resources, publications, etc.

SUGGESTIONS

- Encourage collaboration between ALL EU alliances

SHARING KNOWLEDGE:

- Create a network/community of “IT specialists” to share experience, feedback, best practices, guidelines
- Organize common conferences on “IT issues”
- Coordinate/Organize training on specific tools/technologies/other
- Facilitate communication amongst the community: Provide common/global tools such as mailing lists, chat platforms, wiki, even Gitlab?!
- Create working groups dedicated to specific topics (GDPR, security, authentication, CRIS, collaborative tools, information system, etc.) to which anyone

SHARING SOLUTIONS / ENABLING INTEROPERABILITY:

- Design, develop, share, support, and promote open source solutions, using open protocols/standards whenever possible
- Provide common platforms/services that all alliances could rely on
- Negotiate & propose framework agreements with third-party/commercial partners.

- **In particular, do you see a need for *additional* dedicated e-infrastructures for data storage and management that are distributed and interoperable? Please take into account progress regarding the development of the federated e-infrastructure for research outputs (EOSC, see [ERA Policy Agenda](#)), and the implementation of a digital platform for cooperation in higher education (see the [European strategy for universities](#)).**

The digital services deployed by the alliances are usually hosted by one or several partners. In the first case, it increases the workload of the IT teams of the host institution. In the second case, it makes the deployment of the IT solution and the data exchanges more complicated to manage.

If some infrastructures, such as data centers, were available at the European level for all the alliances, the management will be easier. All the applications will be hosted in the same place and could be managed by people from different institutions. The collaboration for developing common digital platforms, common information system components, or managing the e-infrastructure(s) will increase efficiency.

Policy topic 4: access to excellence

- **What is your advice on how to accelerate access to excellence in science and in value creation for all participants for higher education institutions across the entire ERA, through the European Universities Initiative?**

Tools and initiatives could be developed to support excellence development such as:

- a specific call for proposals to push for the development of excellent laboratories and graduate schools
- development of events at the EU level for researchers from European Alliances to meet and exchange.
- creation/development of specific R&I open databases, including theoretical, experimental, and numerical results/benchmarks;
- creation/support/development of *specialized* open science software;
- training and recorded webinars on how to accelerate access to excellence in science.
- more mobility, more stays for young people, and more early-stage research proposals.
- seeds funding,
- project management training programmes,
- networking events for researchers,

- A lot of effort has been done for the Accreditation ISO/IEC 17025 of several Laboratories of EU-CONEXUS partners. The support for Laboratory Accreditation should be continued as it is recognized path to excellence.

So far, results have been achieved in this direction, but the excellence and connection of scientists should continue. Only by bringing together experienced and excellent scientists in all fields of science and attracting young and promising researchers we will achieve the goals of excellence in all fields.

Policy topic 5: increasing global competitiveness

- **Europe's relative weight at a global level when it comes to research-intensive universities is shrinking. In light of this, a European Excellence Initiative will be established to improve the global competitiveness of Europe's universities, in synergy with the European Universities Initiative of Erasmus+. In your view, what would be key elements of such an Initiative? Secondly, could you envisage that such an initiative specifically targets EU objectives such as the Green Deal or European Missions?**

We have identified three key elements for a European Excellence Initiative:

- a) excellence in the human resource development;
- b) excellence in research infrastructure/technology and the corresponding training;
- c) excellence? in scientific/technological creativity.

Develop pioneering research projects.

Collaborate with stakeholders to bring progress in society.

Respond to concrete problems: funding, salaries, and opportunities.



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This policy brief reflects only the author's view and the European Commission/REA is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.