



EU-CONEXUS RESEARCH FOR SOCIETY

D. 2.1

"ERA policy brief"

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ERA POLICY BRIEF

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

TOPIC: 2ND ERA POLICY BRIEF FROM H2020-SWAFS PROJECT EU-CONEXUS RFS

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

SCOPE OF THE POLICY BRIEF

In this second policy brief, the European Universities pilot I alliances are asked to report on the progress made through cooperation in selected R&I areas and provide a last 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 supported 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 aimed 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.

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 helped co-shape 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), 17 (research management).

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 all EU-CONEXUS RFS work package leaders and to the Management Board of the Alliance, which were expected to give specific answers regarding the problem areas relevant to their specific tasks and activities. Individual responses from the working package leaders have been also considered as reflecting the view of a corresponding partner university. After collecting and structuring the received responses, the EU-CONEXUS Executive Director made a quality check and contributed to the content. Finally, the EU-CONEXUS RFS work package leaders and Alliance Research Council were invited to the final reading and outcome validation. The Alliance Governing Board has also been informed about the submission of the document.

The consolidated EU-CONEXUS ERA Policy Brief maintains the structure that has been provided by the European Commission.

By applying this bottom-up methodology the ERA Policy Brief reflects in a coherent and balanced manner experiences and views from across the Alliance.

FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS

1. Please describe the **challenges** your Alliance encountered in Reporting Period 2 regarding cooperation between universities in the field of R&I in relation to the institutional change areas (transformation modules) foreseen as well regulatory obstacles hampering the cooperation.

(a) develop a common research and innovation agenda

With regard to the intensity of intra-Alliance research collaboration, it should be repeated that most of the EU-CONEXUS partners have not cooperated in research before and that the development of research and innovation cooperation requires time and dialogue to build mutual knowledge, trust and understanding, and hence networking events and tools.

RFS project activities have proved efficient in activating interest for collaboration and concrete joint research initiatives, as shown for example by the COST Action development, through which the EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Area got an important impetus. However, project activities also showed the difficulty of a top-down process for bringing researchers from different institutions together for joint activities. Institutional EU-CONEXUS coordinators, who know the local research community well, put a lot of efforts in inviting and encouraging specific researchers to join activities and projects. Thus, an important lesson learnt is that support of bottom-up research cooperation is more efficient for creating a research community and successful research projects and must be further strengthened.

As the Alliance is thematically focused (on Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability-SmUCS), collaborative efforts have focused on research areas considered relevant to this societal challenge. The perceived lack of inclusivity of the thematic focus was a general concern brought forward by researchers and research managers across the Alliance. On the initiative of the Research Council, a SmUCS definition could be agreed upon which is open across all disciplines. It makes clear to the research community that the thematic focus is asking for a challenge-driven approach to research irrespective of the scientific discipline.

One of the objectives of the project was also to identify research networks on SmUCS in order to include the Alliance in the SmUCS international research networks. Because of the wide, interdisciplinary and inclusive thematic framework, the identification of relevant networks was a challenge. Also, the capacity to actively engage in such networks had to be taken into account. The specific membership options (participating as one or more institutions, as a researcher or as a research unit) for the two selected networks and how the Alliance as a whole will effectively benefit from the network need further exploration.

(2) strengthen human capital

SmUCS is a new focus area of research for which a new kind of researcher has to be trained. SmUCS researchers have an interdisciplinary profile, are able to look at the societal challenges from different viewpoints, they are engaged within local and international communities and they are not afraid to work with and within an entrepreneurial environment. These researchers need a new kind of institutional framework for their studies that European Universities are able to provide. They are constantly exposed to an international research community, they move seamlessly from one EU-CONEXUS university to the other, they have a complementary international network across the globe at their hands, they gain visibility based on thematic specialization and the scaling effect of the combination of institutional reputations, they speak multiple languages and learn multiple disciplinary vocabularies.

The RFS project has developed a transversal skills training programme that was well accepted within the researchers' community. With this programme, new profiles of researchers have been promoted and, at the same time, the added value of the Alliance could be made understandable to researchers. Keeping up this dynamic launched by the RFS project will again depend on the possibility of continuing funding of such programmes through other projects or institutional uptake.

(3) share research infrastructures

During the second phase of the project, the RIIS – Research and Innovation Information System <https://riis.eu-conexus.eu/> (RFS MS7) and the Innovation HUB <https://innovationhub.eu-conexus.eu/> (RFS WP5) were created and launched. After having successfully removed the barriers and obstacles to creating these two platforms, we now are confronted by the challenge of keeping them going, feeding them with new information, regularly updating the information and maintaining them in the long term. Strong institutional commitment is needed for their continuation. While some universities are expected to merge local and joint RIIS systems, other universities are trying to motivate their researchers to register and put their data into joint Alliance RIIS directly.

Long-term strategies of each partner university and their institutional policies with regard to data platforms and infrastructures will have to include these joint platforms. This strategic positioning and institutional commitment are strongly dependent on the reliability of the long-term political and financial support for the European University Initiative and in particular its research dimension.

Another major challenge is the actual sharing of infrastructures: While the RFS project has developed a joint “Access policy roadmap in joint infrastructures and services” (RFS D4.4) its implementation will strongly depend on the ability to exploit funding opportunities that are available for Alliances in order to invest in joint Alliances’ infrastructures. T

he added value for the European research area in this regard is tangible: The thematic framework of the Alliance allows for the creation of a complementary set of infrastructures that could be developed, maintained and exploited jointly. Sharing expertise and know-how, economies of scale, upgrade of excellence frameworks are the most important benefits for intra- and extra-Alliance users. Sharing and rationalising research infrastructures across EU-CONEXUS universities will in the end allow for significant economies of scale that are only possible within a stable institutional framework.

The ESFRI roadmap and support in Horizon Europe for research infrastructures may not cover the range width of research infrastructures available at EU-CONEXUS universities as they cannot be put together under a mono-thematic framework. A cartography of a compendium of infrastructural devices and collections distributed across Europe with a long-term development and maintenance plan attached to it can be another one of the high added values of European Universities’ strategic cooperation.

(4) engage non-academic actors

With regard to Knowledge and Technology Transfer EU-CONEXUS partner universities are in the early phase of establishing the necessary mechanisms to efficiently commercialize research findings on the market. Additionally, the varied legal requirements in different countries with regard to knowledge and innovation transfer present challenges in aligning activities across partners. A large groundwork in mapping and analyzing best practices, and in defining strategies and recommendations has been done during the RFS project and the next step will be to upskill research management staff, promote entrepreneurial skillset among researchers and establish an alliance-wide contact point for more proactive engagement in innovation activities. These activities are partly foreseen to be implemented through other projects, but as stakeholder relations are time-intensive, continuous and long-term investment in creating an effective innovation system is needed.

(5) mainstream Open Science and (6) engage citizens and society

Two major outcomes of the project that promote intra- and extra-Alliance open science and societal engagement are the EU-CONEXUS Gateway on OpenAire <https://eu-conexus.openaire.eu/> and the popularized scientific journal. The EU-CONEXUS Research Council recognised the high value of both initiatives and asked for an economic model in order to maintain them in the future. In particular further EU-CONEXUS RFS – ERA policy brief

editions of the popularized scientific journal will need continued investments which have not been found yet.

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

(1) develop a common research and innovation agenda

Various activities were developed to promote the thematic framework, gain a common vision of an EU-CONEXUS R&I agenda and foster dialogue and intra and extra-Alliance research cooperation:

- A **Research Integrity Committee (RIC)**, has been established, comprising one representative from the research community of each University. The RIC established the EU-CONEXUS **policy** on Code of Conduct Research Integrity (CCRI) that reflects the Partners Policy on R&I, including all disciplinary and interdisciplinary research related to SmUCS. The CCRI is based on the "European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity" (2017). At the same time, each partner had to establish an **individual committee** (in case it has not already been developed), intended to cooperate with the RIC. Dissemination of this policy document was performed via the Alliance websites and social media, and seminars on Research Integrity have been incorporated into PhD courses.
- Within the **Guidebook on the functioning of the ERA** the main challenges and barriers to research cooperation with regard to ERA Policy priorities including Open Science, infrastructures, research careers and innovation were collected across all working groups. Actions are recommended how to tackle these challenges at the institutional level, and a task force composed of vice-rectors for research will ensure the follow-up on these recommendations for closer cooperation on a common scientific agenda. The continuing support from the governance of the partner universities will be essential for the success of this process.
- Staff exchange (**researchers' mobility, job shadowing**) between partners was promoted to better understand the respective research management structures. Despite the use of efficient and functional digital collaboration tools, personal contact continues to be the best motivator for collaboration.
- An **analysis of the national research environment** of partner universities has been done which provided a better understanding of each partner's research funding structure and policies.
- At some partner universities, research management structures (project calls, thesis, mobilities) have integrated the **EU-CONEXUS "colour" in their internal policies** (incentives to submit projects related to SmUCS thematic). This is a strong signal and incentive for researchers to align within a common R&I agenda.
- A **joint Technology Transfer Office** (under Erasmus+) for the promotion of collaboration with industry can be considered as based on work done in the RFS project (WP 5). This new Alliance activity will lead to extra benefits, not only for the sustainability of the Alliance but also for creating job opportunities for students who will better adjust their academic studies and skills to the labour market needs.
- RFS project activities have created the basic structures for promoting the development of joint research projects (platforms, infrastructures, trainings, mobilities) that will make the Joint Research Area more dynamic. The submitted **COST Action Project** is one of the most important concrete

collaboration activities that will – in case of success - intensify EU-CONEXUS research. The Horizon Europe funded EU-CONEXUS ENABLES project-Promoting excellence through innovative ecosystems (Horizon Europe WIDERA-EEA) which was developed during the RFS project period, relies on the work done in RFS and takes up part of its structures and outcomes in its work programme (<https://www.eu-conexus.eu/en/2023/07/26/partners-from-the-alliance-win-eu-conexus-enables-project-under-utcb-lead/>). The scope of the project is to create the framework of an innovative ecosystem promoting sustainable synergies between the alliance and its partners such as fellow municipalities or stakeholders, to develop long-term solutions for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability challenges, based on the Digital Twin approach. The project will also offer training and capacity-building programmes for researchers, promoting a culture of collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement, through hackathons, capacity building, knowledge exchange activities, engaging experts, researchers, and stakeholders in the development and implementation of innovative Digital Twin solutions.

Not least incentivized by RFS activities, other projects for submission in MSCA funding streams are currently under development.

- **Conferences/seminars** and other **events** organised during the last reporting period helped us gain a better understanding of our universities in specific research areas and boosted cooperation, such as 'Grass root networking events' (RFS WP5) or 'Learning on transversal skills seminars' (RFS WP3).

(2) strengthen human capital

Recommendations for creating a **post-doctoral programme** and implementing actions that promote a **Responsible Research and Innovation Strategy** are on the agenda of the Research Council and will need to find adequate funding programmes for being implemented.

(3) share research infrastructures

To encourage researchers to take an interest in each other's scientific activities, to collaborate and to conduct joint research, the **Research & Innovation Information System** (RIIS) and the EU-CONEXUS gateway at the **OpenAire** platform (RFS WP6) were implemented. Also, the **Innovation Hub** is showcasing the innovations coming out of research efforts. For the RIIS an upstreaming solution is under development that is expected to solve the problem of continuous updating of the platform. The OpenAire platform is also to a large extent automatically filled with open access publications from other services. The Innovation Hub will need institutional resources to keep it up to date. In this context, the connection to the joint offer of external services of the Alliance may provide a scaling effect towards the European socio-economic environment of the Alliance.

(4) engage non-academic actors

Outcomes of the RFS projects will be continued in the other projects of the Alliance (Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe).

(5) mainstream Open Science and (6) engage citizens and society

Institutional investment in the popularized scientific journal is under scrutiny at the level of the Research Council.

(7) explore joint university structures

With regard to its research and innovation mission, EU-CONEXUS wants to enable trans-European

research and innovation networks on the Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability (SmUCS) thematic, ensuring that science is driven by excellence and not limited by the research capacity of individual countries, economic sectors, or national institutions. Collaborating partners are able to share both, physical and virtual infrastructures, resources, and best practices relevant to their respective research fields. An **“Access Policy Roadmap for joint infrastructures and services”** has been developed to endorse and facilitate both, intra-alliance and public access to EU-CONEXUS research infrastructures within a common, borderless environment for R&I. In this framework, good practices are identified in order to enhance cooperation, engage external actors, develop R&I alongside education in partner universities and achieve R&I excellence through the integration of research-performing organizations and aligned practices. The promotion of transforming partner universities into inter-organizational structures, coupled with enhanced outreach to the public, serves to strengthen synergies with diverse stakeholders, while at the same time making them more sustainable through coordinated R&I investments, reduction of administrative load and reduced operational costs. Furthermore, the document outlines necessary actions to ensure a healthy and greener workspace aiming to minimize environmental impact.

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.

(a) tangible progress made by **Alliance**:

Links between the different research groups have intensified:

- multiplication of research stays among researchers in the Consortium, with the subsequent creation of links between the different research groups. At the end of the RFS project, we reached about 10% of research staff mobility within the Alliance.
- joint research projects between universities of the consortium, thanks to the increased knowledge of the different teams. In total, there are 8 research projects and 1 EIT project.
- joint infrastructures, such as Research Innovation and Information System (RIIS), InnovationHUB and Open AIRE gateway helped our research community not only to know each other research fields better but also forced for new research projects and other collaborations.
- benchmarking of research policies and good practices.

It is worth mentioning that the EU-CONEXUS Alliance has created a legal entity (EU-CONEXA) that will facilitate collaboration with stakeholders by harmonizing policies, and overcoming national barriers and long administrative procedures.

(b) tangible progress made by the **individual partners**

The following descriptions of institutional changes were the subject of a survey distributed at all partner universities in autumn/winter 2023.

La Rochelle Université

Reported institutional change:

Help/uphold human rights and high general ethical standards, by adoption, development and/or implementation of codes of conduct, ethical review, etc.

The intended target of the action: Researchers

Description: Shortly after the EU-CONEXUS Research & Innovation Code of Conduct of Research Integrity was written by the EU-CONEXUS Research Integrity Committee (RFS WP1), La Rochelle Université appointed a Research Integrity officer in order to develop its institutional policy on Scientific Integrity. Discussions with the participants of the RIC working group allowed them to exchange good practices including training programmes on Scientific Integrity which La Rochelle Université plans to intensify in the years ahead.

Likewise, the work conducted by WP3 representatives on Deliverable 3.2 “A Study on the challenges of inter-campus EU-CONEXUS to implement actions required by HRS4R award” opened fruitful discussions and good practice exchange between partners on the implementation of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers – Partners like La Rochelle Université who only started to engage in the HRS4R journey could especially benefit from the valuable return on experience of partners who had already obtained the HRS4R award.

Agriculture University of Athens

Reported institutional change 1:

Develop GEP/Measures

The intended target of the action: Researchers; Universities overall; The project itself/the project's host

Description: Through the RFS-Research for Society project, AUA created an institutional Gender Equality Committee. An institutional GEP has been developed and the academic community has been informed regarding gender equality. The representative in the RFS & Institutional Gender Equality Committee is the same in order to transfer knowledge and best practices from one Committee to another.

Reported institutional change 2:

Helpuphold human rights and high general ethical standard, by adoption, developement and/or implementation of codes of conduct, ethical review, etc.

The intended target of the action: Researchers; Universities overall; The project itself/the project's host; Research performing organizations

Description: A similar approach is also for the Research Integrity Committee. Institutionally, we had a Research Integrity Committee. Meanwhile, in the RFS Research Integrity Committee the same representative is participating in order to create a liaison between the institutional and the RFS Committee, make any relevant adjustments and serve the same mission.

Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest

Reported institutional change 1:

Develop GEP measures

The intended target of the action: Researchers; Universities overall

Description: The EU-CONEXUS RFS Working group on GEP had an impact on our representative knowledge and skills regarding this topic since we did not have a dedicated department before this project in UTCB and we started to integrate the best practices and guidelines developed and learned in the working group in our activities – for example, we have made in UTCB with the initiative of our

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representative in this working group 2 public campaigns promoting girls in civil engineering/STEAM and their leadership skills with a very good reach, and we discussed with the communication responsible to integrate more women pictures in our marketing materials/social media activities, we will continue our involvement in this direction. Video with our student girls involved in leadership positions in student organizations:

https://fb.watch/njD_QAqg5j/
<https://www.facebook.com/UTCBRO/posts/pfbid022daoSMwk4XAViHJok67Av9xCWzokBuijxzHBfnm7AGopsU2hSb5VJwEUPNWFfocel>

Reported institutional change 2:

Other – involve students and stakeholders in developing potential solutions to society challenges and be aware of the environmental impact

The intended target of the action: students, mentors - researchers

Description:

During the RFS project we implemented a hackathon with student teams, stakeholders and mentors where they had to take into consideration a societal challenge, in this way we think that we got closer to our stakeholders, and being one of the first hackathons organized by UTCB, our staff and our mentors learned from this experience how to organize this type of event and the added value this experiences (innovative, with stakeholders involvement and taking into consideration real society problems) can bring to the students, making them more interested in research. <https://utcb.ro/en/research-for-society-hackathon/>

Klaipeda University

Reported institutional change 1:

Foster open science and open access to scientific results and data (e.g. online open notebooks, open educational resources, open data, etc.)

The intended target of the action: Universities overall

Reported institutional change 2:

Develop activities to anticipate the potential social, environmental, and economic impacts of research (e.g. risk assessment, TA, foresight, Impact assessment, gender analysis)

The intended target of the action: Universities overall

Description: Our university has undertaken various initiatives in this regard. Firstly, we've collaborated with the EU-CONEXUS Think Smart, Create Green School Contest, enabling the participation of multiple teams of high school students. Additionally, our STEM center is being established at the university.

Young individuals are actively encouraged to engage in various EU-CONEXUS events, training sessions, and conferences, where they can exchange valuable insights on research with doctoral students and researchers from across the consortium.

Furthermore, we've introduced a Skills Training program tailored to predoctoral researchers in the early stages of their careers. This program extensively covers topics related to Research Ethics and Gender Equality.

We've notably increased the involvement of doctoral students and budding researchers in international conferences, exchange seminars, research placements, and more.

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Moreover, we have been enthusiastic participants in various research dissemination activities. These activities span the national landscape, such as Science Week, which is geared towards secondary school students and society as a whole, contributing to a greater awareness of sustainability. Internationally, we have been actively engaged in events alongside our partner institutions, including the EU-CONEXUS Festival, hosted for three consecutive years at the University of La Rochelle, and the researchers' meeting held at AUA, Athens, in the last academic year.

Reported institutional change 3:

Help develop R&I standards that enhance social responsibility, inclusiveness, sustainability of R&I process and products

The intended target of the action: Universities overall

Description: Fostering human rights and upholding stringent ethical standards within an organization or society encompasses a blend of adopting, enhancing, and executing codes of conduct, undertaking ethical evaluations, and potentially instigating institutional modifications. At our university, we've established a Research Ethics Committee tasked with evaluating the alignment of research methodologies when approving research techniques.

We've taken measures to ensure that the Code of Conduct is easily accessible to all university members. Furthermore, comprehensive training and guidance on the Code of Conduct's contents have been provided to our staff.

The leadership of the university is unwavering in its commitment to maintaining elevated ethical principles. We've initiated a regimen of routine ethics training and awareness initiatives aimed at enlightening students, staff, and stakeholders about the significance of ethical conduct and the preservation of human rights.

Catholic University of Valencia

Reported institutional change 1:

Develop material for integration of science and society in curricula (e.g. covering STEM, public engagement, ethics, gender)

The intended target of the action: The project itself/the project's host; Universities overall; Public authorities; Researchers; Businesses and Industry R&D; Citizens and NGOs

Description: Our university has developed numerous actions related to this topic. The first of them would be the collaboration with the EU-CONEXUS Think Smart, Create Green School Contest, which has allowed the participation of numerous teams of high school students.

Likewise, the development of a Summer School about Open Science organized by our university, which has allowed us to share best practices on Research with doctoral students and researchers from all over the consortium.

We have also developed Skills Training for predoctoral researchers in the early stages of their careers, where aspects related to Research Ethics and Gender Equality have been extensively addressed.

We have increased considerably the participation of doctoral students and young researchers in International Conferences, Exchange Seminars, Research Stays, etc.

We have actively participated in several research dissemination events, both at the national level, such as Science Week, focusing on secondary school students, and society in general and increasing their knowledge about sustainability. In addition we were fully involved in international events jointly with our partners such as the EU-CONEXUS Festival, held for three years now at the University of La Rochelle or the meeting of researchers held at AUA, Athens last academic year. Different stakeholders, such as municipalities, public bodies, port authorities and companies, have also participated in these actions in a relevant way.

Reported institutional change 2:

Help uphold human rights and high general ethical standards, by adoption, development and/or implementation of codes of conduct, ethical review, etc.

The intended target of the action: The project itself/the project's host; Public authorities; International organisations; Researchers; Businesses and Industry R&D; Citizens and NGOs

Description: The training offered to young researchers in the early stages of their careers has focused especially on ethical aspects and integrity in research. Likewise, the University has approved a Code of Ethics of Good Practice in Research, within the framework of the European Code of Conduct for Integrity in Research.

Researchers have also been offered ongoing training on Ethics and Transparency in Research, as well as on Good Practices and methodological aspects in the direction of doctoral theses.

Specifically, and as an initiative of solidarity and support for Human Rights, a collaboration agreement has been signed with the University of Odessa, in Ukraine, to facilitate the work of its researchers and students.

Reported institutional change 3:

Enlarge the scope of R&I activities by fostering informal science education (museums, science centres), promoting citizen science, engaging civil society actors and citizens

The intended target of the action: The project itself/the project's host; Public authorities; International organisations; Researchers; Businesses and Industry R&D; Citizens and NGOs

Description: RFS has made it possible to considerably increase research dissemination actions, making research results more accessible to the general public. On the one hand, the dissemination actions of the Science Week, as well as the Researchers' Night, have increased. Both actions have contributed to bringing Science closer to Secondary School students, Vocational Training Cycles, as well as to society in general thanks to the media.

Other dissemination actions have been developed to connect the Company and the University, in which the main obstacles that companies must overcome when researching and innovating have been analyzed, and how these are conditioned both by consumers and by legislation and technological advances.

Likewise, an outreach session was held with companies and students in connection with the European Maritime Day. Also noteworthy is the participation in an international photographic contest on the dissemination of research through photography or the dissemination actions on Women and Science.

Reported institutional change 4:

Develop activities to anticipate the potential social, environmental, and economic impacts of research (e.g. risk assessment, TA, foresight, Impact assessment, gender analysis)

The intended target of the action: International organisations; Researchers

Description: In previous sections we have pointed out the important acceleration in the research activities themselves, but also in the training, diffusion and dissemination of science developed during these three years. In any case, probably the most important contribution has been to sensitize all UCV researchers to the importance of increasing the international component of research, collaborating with colleagues from other universities of the EU-CONEXUS Consortium.

This is clearly a before and after in terms of accelerating research and its contribution to society in general.

Likewise, the Vice-Rectorate for Research has strengthened its leadership, centrally managing all actions and contributing to a greater coexistence of research and its dissemination throughout the University Institution.

University of Zadar

Reported institutional change 1:

Help uphold human rights and high general ethical standards, by adoption, development and/or implementation of codes of conduct, ethical review, etc.

The intended target of the action: Universities overall; Researchers

Description: Promoting human rights and high general ethical standards within an organization or society is a complex and multifaceted task. It involves a combination of adopting, developing, and implementing codes of conduct, conducting ethical reviews, and possible institutional changes. We have ensured that the Code of Conduct is readily available to all members of the university. We have provided training and guidance to employees on the content of the Code of Conduct. This helps ensure that all members understand the ethical expectations and how to implement them in their work. The University leadership is committed to maintaining high ethical standards. We have begun conducting regular ethics training and awareness programs to educate students, employees, and stakeholders about the importance of ethical behavior and human rights. As a large and important organization, we communicate the organization's commitment to human rights and ethical standards through various channels such as internal communications, annual reports, and public statements. We also recognize that promoting ethical standards is an ongoing process that requires dedication and vigilance.

Reported institutional change 2:

Extension of HRS4R policy document

The expansion of HRS4R is typically a policy framework adopted by European research institutions and universities to improve the recruitment, working conditions, and career development of researchers. These policies aim to align with the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (C&C). The implementation of the project also led to the improvement of the human resources management system and the renewal of the strategic document HRS4R at the University of Zadar. As a result of the engagement in the processes and activities within the project RFS, the University of Zadar was again awarded the logo "Human Resources Excellence in Research" by the European Commission. The University of Zadar can continue to use the award 'HR Excellence in Research' to promote itself as a provider of a stimulating and favourable working environment for researchers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *The inclusive cooperation approach of the Alliances was shown to accelerate institutional change also in less R&I-intensive universities, clearly indicating it has a positive impact on capacity building in R&I, next to education. It is however unclear up to now if the approach also positively affects excellent research. Therefore, please provide arguments and concrete examples how your Alliance provides (or is anticipated to provide) added value as compared to 'traditional' cross-border cooperation between researchers, such as through competitive collaborative research projects by the Framework Programme.*

The EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Area is not a separate activity. It is the basic building block for the provision of internationally renowned educational offers and provides marketable innovations for the socio-economic environment. Universities have the unique potential of having all: students, researchers, and innovators. Sometimes, by the way, this is one person. Thematically oriented European Universities have even more: they have the potential to center their research-based education around a unique thematic focus.

Based on its long-term strategy, vision and mission, EU-CONEXUS concentrates on the creation of new knowledge on Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability, and this is done in a sustainable and long-term perspective. Even if competitive project funding will still be necessary for driving excellence, continuous funding of EU-CONEXUS research groups can provide sustainability to a thematic research focus with high impact potential. This thematic focus will remain central in occupying researchers over the necessary time period for creating innovations. They will not turn to a different subject once a 3-5 years funded project is finalized and funding is available for a different subject in a different consortium. European Universities can effectively contribute to what e.g. the Horizon Missions are pursuing: sustainable long-term thematic focusing on finding solutions to pressing societal challenges.

Specific examples of added value created by RFS include:

- Following the identification of common thematic interests the number of research projects submitted increased (ERA action 9 – Promote international cooperation as well as ERA action 12 – accelerate the Green/Digital Transition of Europe's Key Industrial Ecosystems).
- The existence of greater opportunities to use common resources enables the publication of higher-quality research results in highly respected journals. (ERA action 2 – EU copyright and data legislative framework for research)
- As it was mentioned above the cooperation between the partners has been significantly enriched. It is still early to present tangible results, but right now researchers are already working on the design of complex research projects between partners, as well as on the development of doctoral thesis projects in co-direction between researchers of the consortium. (ERA action 4 – Promote research careers, talent circulation and mobility; ERA action 7 – Upgrade guidance for better knowledge valorisation). In the medium term, this will certainly lead to an increase in impact publications in international co-authorship, as well as an acceleration in international mobilities to reinforce joint research.
- EU-CONEXUS joint research infrastructures facilitate the free circulation of researchers promoting a more collaborative working mode and more intensive cross-border cooperation. (ERA action 4 – Promote research careers, talent circulation and mobility)
- Training for young researchers and hackathons helped them boost their international network and transversal skills;

- The OpenAire gateway (ERA action 1 - Enable Open Science, including through the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC)) and RIIS platform will make it easier for researchers to find colleagues with the same interests. It provides a comprehensive description of the available Human Resources and Infrastructures within the Alliance that facilitate the implementation of interdisciplinary R&I on SmUCS themes, encouraging collaboration across Institutions (ERA action 8 - Strengthen research infrastructures)
- Open Science and Knowledge transfer events made our universities interact more with the stakeholders and the community. (ERA action 14 - Bring Science closer to citizens)
- Established Gender Equality and Research Integrity working groups (ERA action 5 - Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness).
- Prepared documents where good practices are collected, made all the members learn more about each subject:
 - D.3.3. Study „Good practices on talent management, research and internationalisation accelerators“ (ERA action 4)
 - D5.3 Report on best practices and recommendations on mainstreaming the entrepreneurial mindset of researchers (ERA action 4)
 - D5.2 Checklist of good practices for cooperation among actors of innovation ecosystems (ERA action 9 and 15)
 - D6.2. White paper on open science practices and barriers (ERA action 1)

In this context, more R&I-intensive universities can identify structures or services that could be incorporated into coordinated activities. Additionally, they can identify synergies to apply for international and regional funding programmes. For example, a common coastal challenge could be studied in different geographical areas and ecosystems, adopting a holistic approach. Cooperation through the Alliance can guarantee long-term research and innovation investments compared to 'traditional' cross-border cooperation. (ERA action 13)

2. *The Alliances have repeatedly asked the EU and Member States (MS) to design a holistic support system, covering all their missions at once and reducing administrative burden to a minimum. Please explain your views and suggestions on how this should be realised in practice on the medium and long-term. Take into account differences in competences (e.g. R&I is a shared competence between EU and MS, while education is exclusive national competence) and be precise in the support target (e.g. the arrangement of common support for actual joint research activities might need to be different than support for building joint capacity in training, research coordination, etc). Be as concrete as possible, and where relevant illustrate your recommendation with practice examples of such holistic support currently provided at national level.*

The European Universities Alliances met with the EC in February 2024 to discuss the development of an Investment Pathway. Two scenarios were presented at that meeting:

Scenario A contemplates the contribution of a small portion of funding from FP10 to Erasmus+ to enable a joint call. This scenario reflects most strongly the European Universities Alliances' request for a unified, simplified multi-mission holistic pathway.

The other scenario reflects the status quo and does not seem to be addressing the European Council approach and mandate for the European Universities Initiative.

An investment pathway must facilitate the integration of all university's missions (education, research and innovation, transfer to society). Therefore, in relation to the options presented, we strongly support Scenario A in order to support the establishment of holistic and sustainable long-term funding to deepen transnational cooperation of European University alliances.

The EU could financially support the European Universities for engaging in a Joint Research Area as well as on all levels of infrastructure. The scientific programme of a European University could be subject to an intergovernmental convention/contract signed by the EU-CONEXUS universities and national and European funders. Concrete objectives can be set and concrete instruments can be envisaged in how to reach these objectives.

Some of these instruments are listed below:

a. Joint Research Institutes (Excellence Hubs)

The EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Institutes are virtual objects for integrative networking that promote the exchange of research projects, identification of common research interests, development of joint research projects and the construction of the EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Area on SmUCS.

b. Graduate Schools, Doctoral Schools

SmUCS is a new focus area of research for which a new kind of researcher has to be trained. SmUCS researchers have an interdisciplinary profile, are able to look at the societal challenges from different viewpoints; they are engaged within local and international communities and they are not afraid to work with and within an entrepreneurial environment. These researchers need a new kind of institutional framework for their studies that European Universities are able to provide. They are constantly exposed to an international research community, they move seamlessly from one EU-CONEXUS university to the other, they have a complementary international network across the globe at their hands, they gain visibility based on thematic specialization and the scaling effect of the combination of institutional reputations, they speak multiple languages and learn multiple disciplinary vocabularies.

EU-CONEXUS is currently exploring the feasibility of an inter-university Doctoral School. A Graduate School can be the next step.

c. Joint support structures

Centralised service structures help in general the successful development of the Joint Research Area. Those are within the actual EU-CONEXUS environment mainly: project development support, scientific managers, transversal training offers (IPR, ethics,), event organisation, administrative support for project implementation, collaboration platforms, Research and Innovation Information System, open science gateway.

Some recommendations are:

- to focus more on digital systems and to achieve interoperability between the systems existing in different countries. A system that can download and manage data without having to change it is certainly one of the elements that should reduce the administrative burden.
- One platform/data-base with all the researchers and research activities in Europe where researchers can see the profile and information from other universities linked with different platforms (Research Gate for example)
- Calls for "Research Infrastructures" in the frame of "Horizon Europe" dedicated to Alliances of European Universities
- More calls for support structures concerning research (like SwafS).
- Permanent financial support for Alliances governance through judicial bodies (Associations) that were created.
- HUB for researchers training at the European level on Open Science, Technology Transfer etc.

- European training dedicated for each alliance/university for applying to different calls, on project management and research management;
- anything that facilitates the work of the researcher, avoiding monotonous and repetitive forms, would be appreciated.

Evaluation

We also suggest to evaluate results in a specific way, adapted to Alliances, and in a quantitative as well as qualitative way, e.g., the number of theses in international co-direction, number of researcher mobilities, number of joint research projects presented, and number of publications in international co-authorship.

Additionally, the EU should provide guidelines to Member States to overcome legal restraints arising from national policies.

3. *Please illustrate with concrete examples how your Alliance will integrate the work on the transformation modules developed under this H2020-SwafS support with the Erasmus+ support to the Alliance project. Please provide the current state-of-affairs and your plans to integrate all your missions.*

Research & Innovation has always been part of EU-CONEXUS Erasmus+ funded project, whether through research-based educational modules, joint virtual research institutes, innovation contests, research mobility funds and joint research project incentives. Research Integrity issues are foreseen to be incorporated into Erasmus+ WP4 EU-CONEXUS PhD level Joint actions. In Erasmus+ activities are foreseen based on the EU-CONEXUS RI such as “Research to Education” (WP7) initiatives with the introduction of “Open Lab Hours” and “Student Research Hub” as well as the promotion of R&I on SmUCS, through “Support Joint Research Structures” (WP9)

A Contact Point for knowledge/technological transfer CONTI establishment is foreseen on the level of EU-CONEXUS University. CONTI will provide services to academic staff supporting them in the process of transferring research results into the market, developing entrepreneurship skills of students and staff, establishment and scaling-up of start-ups.

The learning programme on transversal skills will be extended with the BIP (Blended Intensive Programme KA131)

EU-CONEXUS is firmly committed to developing a comprehensive Alliance model, integrating all University missions including research.

For example, our consortium is working to facilitate international co-direction of doctoral theses. This is an Erasmus+ initiative that has a direct impact on the acceleration of research and shared research at the international level, since, in short, it involves putting two research groups in contact with each other in order to accelerate their cooperation.

Considering the end of the SwafS funding, additional research-related activities were integrated into the Erasmus+ funded 2nd phase of the Alliance - EU-CONEXUS+ (2022-2026). The Alliance also answered the European Excellence Initiative call under the WIDERA Programme and was delighted to receive the funding for its EU-CONEXUS ENABLES project proposal. This project integrates activities that were started under the H2020-SwafS project EU-CONEXUS-Research For Society, including work on Research Integrity, gender equality, training and mentoring activities for early-career researchers and Open Science, OpenAire, RIIS and Innovation Hub platforms and Popular science journals will be supported to be developed further.

However, sustainable, long-term and sufficient transnational and European funding mechanisms are needed to support institutional structures (e.g. staff for governance, management, administration) and to make the work done under the SwafS project on the transformational modules produced sustainable.