EU CONEXUS
European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability

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Lessons learnt on piloting a legal entity

D1.6

WP1 Alliance Management, Coordination and Support

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Numbered citations refer to the source list on pages 18–19. Recording timestamps identify passages in the leadership interview. References to an approved action or proposal identify commitments and descriptions, not automatically completed results.

Terminology

EU-CONEXUS refers to the Alliance. EU-CONEXUS AISBL or EU-CONEXA refers to its Belgian international non-profit association. EU-CONEXUS Plus refers to the 2022–2026 funded action. These terms are kept distinct throughout the report.

AISBL: association internationale sans but lucratif. ESEU: A European Status for ECIU University. EGTC: European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation. EEIG / GEIE: European Economic Interest Grouping. IPR: intellectual property rights.

> **The main findings concern the organisation of collective action. The report does not claim that incorporation alone delivered all planned services or resolved every regulatory barrier.**

Executive summary

EU-CONEXUS piloted a shared legal entity to give selected joint activities an organisational basis beyond the administration of a single member university. The association, EU-CONEXUS AISBL, referred to in the project as EU-CONEXA, became a beneficiary of EU-CONEXUS Plus alongside the nine university partners. The pilot therefore concerns the practical use of a common organisation, not the creation of a replacement university or the transfer of all university responsibilities to an alliance-level body. [1, participant list; 2, consortium set-up]

The central finding is that the association strengthened the organisation of collective action. Former leadership identifies more formal institutional relationships, common funds and a fairer distribution of responsibility for shared activities as its main contributions. These benefits are different from a demonstrated reduction in every administrative burden. Establishment and early operation also required more legal, accounting and banking work than anticipated, and common procedures were not always sufficiently understood by their users. [5, 09:21–18:38 and 22:41–30:23]

Documentary evidence adds substance to that account. The project records confirm the association's own beneficiary status and allocated grant share. A signed September 2025 agreement shows it commissioning external support for the Alliance's strategic planning. The 2026 LevelUP proposal describes an established coordination role while presenting the progressive transfer of coordination staff to the association as a subsequent step. These are distinct stages of development, not evidence that every envisaged function was already fully operational. [2, change log of 29 August 2022; 3, Data Sheet; 10; 11, p. 18]

The pilot also demonstrated the importance of separating legal capacity from funding eligibility. The May 2026 amendment removed direct support for preparation and submission of external project proposals from the relevant EU-CONEXUS Plus tasks, while retaining training, information and internal cooperation activities. A shared entity can organise a broader institutional mission, but each activity still needs an appropriate mandate, resources and funding basis. [4, changes 1–5]

ESEU provides a useful framework for interpreting this experience through eight functions: staffing, funding, flexible learning, continuing-education revenue, facilities, data, intellectual property, and purchasing. Its 2024 roadmap also distinguishes stakeholder expectations from the capabilities of particular legal instruments. Examples from ECIU, Una Europa, 4EU+, UNITA and Eucor illustrate different ways of organising these functions; they are not used as a ranking of legal forms or as substitutes for EU-CONEXUS implementation evidence. [13, pp. 8–22; 14–19]

> **The principal lesson: establishing a legal entity creates a common capacity to act; making that capacity useful requires agreed functions, reliable procedures, competent staff, sustainable resources and continuing institutional ownership.**

The proposed follow-up is to consolidate a defined service portfolio, clarify decision and signature responsibilities, maintain a shared compliance and contract record, develop the staffing model on a function-by-function basis, and monitor service quality as well as expenditure. At the evidence cut-off, the contractual project period had not yet ended. The final issue should incorporate the remaining M48 operational evidence without changing the distinction between verified results, reported experience and future development.

1. Purpose, scope and evidence

1.1 Deliverable purpose and reporting boundary

D1.6 records the lessons learnt from piloting a legal entity within EU-CONEXUS. It is a public report under WP1, led by La Rochelle Université and due in month 48. EU-CONEXUS Plus runs from 1 November 2022 to 31 October 2026. The earlier establishment process is included because it explains the assumptions subsequently tested during the pilot. [1, pp. 2, 31 and 37; 3, Data Sheet]

The scope is alliance-wide: education, research, innovation, service to society, and their supporting governance and administration. The analysis concerns the legal entity's contribution to these activities, not an evaluation of every Alliance output. It complements, rather than replaces, the Alliance sustainability and continuity plan, general quality assurance policy and specialist work-package reports. [1, WP1 and deliverable list; 6, joint mission and long-term strategy]

1.2 Evidence and analytical method

The evidence combines the amended Description of the Action and grant documentation; published establishment and governance records; the Alliance mission; a signed service agreement; a retrospective discussion with former Executive Director Isabella Baer-Eiselt and former Deputy Director Laura Delvaux; and later institutional documents. The 2026 LevelUP proposal and two July 2026 institutional endorsements are used for the statements they actually contain, not as proof that the next project's activities have been implemented. [1–12]

The transcript provides first-hand experience, but contains transcription errors and approximate recollections. Names and terminology have been normalised where unambiguous; approximate costs, uncertain intellectual-property transactions and conjectures about third parties have not been converted into findings. The date of the interview is not recorded in the supplied transcript. Its timestamp references identify passages within the recording, not calendar dates. [5]

For each topic, the report distinguishes the initial need, the response or arrangement documented, the experience reported, and the transferable lesson. ESEU's functional approach supplies the comparative framework. Official alliance publications supply examples of organisational practice. Proposed follow-up measures are the analytical conclusions of this report and remain subject to the competent EU-CONEXUS bodies' decisions.

1.3 Limits of the assessment

The material supports a qualitative organisational assessment, not an audited calculation of savings or a causal estimate of impact. A grant allocation is not expenditure; a published procedure is not proof of payment; a planned milestone is not a completed result; and administrative coordination is not necessarily direct employment. No consolidated final accounts, transaction-level service dataset or complete staffing register were available in the evidence set used for this deliverable.

The public version does not reproduce private personnel information, unverified criticism of individual providers or confidential strategic advice. Current legal and tax questions require the applicable rules and the association's validated documents to be checked for the specific transaction. The ESEU roadmap is treated as a dated project analysis, not as a statement of legislation subsequently enacted.

2. From initial rationale to an operating entity

The original discussion was driven by practical difficulties as well as the ambition to sustain cooperation. The former leadership recalls procurement constraints and different levels of student support, alongside a wish to organise shared services without locating every responsibility in one partner. The discussion developed incrementally during 2020–2021. In retrospect, the participants considered that a fuller definition of functions should have preceded the selection of a legal structure. [5, 00:43–06:11]

Period / milestone	What the evidence establishes	Significance for the pilot
2020–2021	The interview recalls repeated consideration of a joint legal instrument; precise dates of the earliest discussions remain unconfirmed. [5, 00:43–05:14]	Institutional agreement and clarity of purpose were part of establishment, not merely formalities after choosing a structure.
14 July 2022 - 18 September 2022	A notarial attestation records a constitutive deed by seven universities. The attestation itself still refers to subsequent steps for recognition and legal personality. [7, attestation] The authenticated deed was established on 14 July, while the Royal Decree formalising it was issued on 18 September 2022, the two dates are distinct and confirmed by the public notarial attestation.	The deed date must not be presented as proof that every registration, recognition and operational step was completed that day.
29 August 2022	The Description of the Action change log records the move from the proposed affiliated-entity arrangement to full beneficiary status. [2, change log]	The entity's role in the funding architecture had to be expressly agreed.
10 October 2022	Published General Assembly minutes record appointments and acceptance of the Agricultural University of Athens and South East Technological University as full members. [8]	Membership and statutory governance were established through identifiable decisions.
From November 2022	EU-CONEXA participates as beneficiary 10; La Rochelle Université remains the coordinating beneficiary. [1, p. 3]	Shared legal capacity operates alongside, not instead of, the grant consortium.
2025–2026	A shared strategic-planning contract, the 2026 amendment and subsequent institutional planning documents evidence continued operational and organisational development. [4; 9–12]	The pilot is a process of consolidation and adaptation rather than a single incorporation event.

The chronology distinguishes recollection, formal records and later planning. It does not infer dates of bank-account activation, Royal Decree, payroll commencement or specific payments from the incorporation documents.

The Belgian location was presented by the Alliance as a way to provide a shared base outside the countries of the member institutions and maintain proximity to European cooperation networks. The operational lesson is that such positioning needs to be

accompanied by access to the professional expertise and administrative support required in the country of establishment. [20; 5, 13:02–15:52] Furthermore, a well-established local network facilitates a clearer and more immediate understanding of the institutional environment, the local context.

3. What was being piloted: the operating model

3.1 Three related but distinct levels

Level	Function in the EU-CONEXUS setting	Boundary that needs to remain clear
The Alliance	The long-term partnership, common mission, academic cooperation and collective strategic direction. [6]	Alliance objectives do not automatically change each university's statutory competences or internal decision procedures.
The association	A separate organisation supporting agreed common functions, holding responsibilities in its own name and administering selected shared resources. [2; 5]	It does not become the employer, owner or contracting party for every activity simply because that activity carries the EU-CONEXUS name.
The funded consortium	The participants and responsibilities defined by the relevant Grant Agreement and Description of the Action. [1; 3]	EU-CONEXA is a beneficiary of EU-CONEXUS Plus; it is not the project coordinator and does not replace the other beneficiaries' obligations.

This distinction is essential for interpreting the pilot. Shared strategy may be agreed at Alliance level, a service commissioned by the association, and the underlying academic work performed by universities under a particular funding arrangement. The operational design must identify which organisation is acting at each step and which decision gives it authority to do so.

3.2 A common instrument with retained institutional ownership

The published statutory text provides for an indefinite duration and an all-mission purpose, including fundraising, partnerships, staff recruitment and service contracting. It provides for a General Assembly and Executive Board, with operational roles and delegation arrangements. Additional contributions do not carry additional voting rights. These provisions describe organisational capacity; they are not an implementation record. [7, arts. 4–5, 9–12 and 19–22]

The interview explains that Alliance and association governance were deliberately kept aligned to protect an equal voice for the members and prevent the common instrument from developing separately from the partnership. This helped sustain ownership but created a continuing need to distinguish statutory decisions from project and academic decisions. Alignment of membership does not make two bodies legally interchangeable. [5, 27:47–30:23]

3.3 Evidence of an evolving coordination role

The 2026 LevelUP proposal describes the association as supporting cross-alliance procedures, work-package leaders and common service acquisition. It also sets out the progressive transfer of coordination staff as a next step. The appropriate reading is therefore an organisation with an established coordination role and a staffing model still

being developed—not a completed transfer of all coordination employment or university support services. [11, pp. 18 and consortium set-up]

> **For every common activity, four questions should have an explicit answer: who decides; who contracts or employs; who provides the money; and who is responsible for delivery and follow-up.**

4. Lessons learnt from the EU-CONEXUS pilot

4.1 Define the functions before selecting the instrument

The pilot began with both an institutional ambition and immediate practical needs. A legal entity was expected to make common action more stable, support joint purchasing and enable more coherent financial support. However, the interview describes the functional analysis as following, rather than fully preceding, the discussion of legal form. It also recalls an expectation that the chosen arrangement would remain relatively light and could later be adapted. [5, 00:43–06:11]

The lesson is to assess the instrument against concrete transactions. Paying a mobility allowance, employing a colleague in another country, commissioning software, administering an internal call and receiving a donation involve different counterparties, documents, risks and expertise. A structure may facilitate some of these functions while offering little immediate simplification for others. ESEU's eight-use-case approach reinforces this distinction between an overall institutional ambition and the actual functions to be supported. [13, pp. 8 and 19–20]

For EU-CONEXUS, the proposed response is a concise service portfolio. Each service should specify its users, responsible body, operational lead, funding basis, delivery process and expected benefit. Activities should be added when the mandate and resources are clear. A legally possible function need not be centralised when a member university can deliver it more effectively through an agreed arrangement.

4.2 Budget for operational readiness, not only incorporation

The former leadership reports that the establishment process required more professional support than anticipated. Early advice about procurement was reconsidered following specialist legal review. Opening a bank account required substantial documentation and in-person steps. The recollected costs do not provide a sufficiently consistent breakdown to calculate a definitive establishment total or cost overrun. They do establish that incorporation fees alone were an inadequate proxy for the effort needed to become operational. [5, 09:21–15:52]

These experiences should not be reduced to criticism of particular providers. They reveal the need to match expertise to the organisation's intended activities and membership. Advice on forming an association is different from advice on cross-border employment, publicly funded procurement, tax treatment or administration of financial support. The responsibility for integrating that advice remains with the organisation's decision-makers.

A practical readiness plan should cover banking and authorised representatives; financial administration; procurement and contract review; employment arrangements; insurance and risk management; record retention; and day-to-day access to specialist advice. Each item needs an owner and a realistic implementation sequence. Any compliance assumptions that underpin a budget or service promise should be documented before that promise is made.

> **Transferable lesson: the start-up milestone is not merely "entity established", but "the first agreed services can be delivered reliably, with the necessary authority, resources and controls".**

4. Lessons learnt: shared resources and funding

4.3 Shared funds can improve the distribution of responsibility

The clearest operational benefit reported is the ability to organise common funds separately from the budget of a single member university. In the earlier model, a university administering a service for the whole Alliance could also carry the associated co-financing burden. The former leadership considered that centralising selected services through the association helped make this distribution more equitable. [5, 23:58–25:35]

The grant documents confirm that this is more than an informal coordinating arrangement: EU-CONEXA has its own beneficiary position and an allocated EU contribution within EU-CONEXUS Plus. That figure is a contractual allocation, not a statement of actual expenditure, money received, annual revenue or independently available reserves. [3, Data Sheet, p. 9]

Membership contributions were initially explained to partners through the identified co-financing requirement. The interview recalls an 80/20 costing rationale and equal distribution of the required member contribution. This is a historical account of budget construction, not an applicable reimbursement rate: the Grant Agreement is a lump-sum agreement and its funding-rate provision is "not applicable". The report does not infer the internal source of each university's payment. [5, 16:11–18:38; 3, art. 5]

The management implication is to distinguish common core costs, activity-specific contributions and project-restricted funds in decision papers. Fairness requires an agreed allocation principle and a clear explanation of what a contribution funds. It should not be inferred simply from identical invoices, nor should service benefits be measured solely by the amount contributed.

4.4 Legal capacity does not determine grant eligibility

The 2026 amendment is a particularly instructive case. Direct preparation and submission support for external funding applications, together with the associated Project Development Fund, was removed from the relevant work-package descriptions. Training, information and internal collaboration support remained within the revised scope. The amendment thus distinguishes a potential Alliance function from what this particular action finances. [4, changes 1–5; 1, WP6 and WP10]

This distinction also applies to future research support, external services or revenue-generating activities. An activity may align with the association's mission but still require a different funding source, separate authorisation or additional administrative arrangements. Describing it as an Alliance priority or paying through the association does not resolve those questions.

For proposed activities, the recommended sequence is to establish the mandate, check the funding basis, identify the deliverable or service, assign the responsible organisation and retain the implementation evidence. Lump-sum funding changes the basis on which the grant is calculated; it does not remove the obligation to implement the agreed action properly or keep evidence of the work. Internal financial management and statutory accounting remain distinct from the grant's reporting model. [3, arts. 6, 11 and 20]

4. Lessons learnt: governance and contracting

4.5 Alignment needs explicit delegation and usable transparency

The association contributed to formalising institutional relationships, according to the former Executive Director. At the same time, the former Deputy Director reported continuing concerns about the visibility of budgets and the clarity of procedures. These observations concern different dimensions: formal accountability and the ability of colleagues to understand how a service works. One can improve while the other remains unsatisfactory. [5, 22:41–26:26]

The May 2025 Governing Board discussion also identified the need to simplify governance and connect strategic choices with operational implementation. This supports a lesson about the management of the common entity, rather than a conclusion that an additional layer of decision-making is inherently beneficial. [9, governance and strategic-workshop outcomes]

The proposed response is a decision-and-delegation map covering reserved statutory decisions, Alliance strategic decisions, academic responsibilities, expenditure authorisation and signature powers. Papers and minutes should identify the capacity in which each body acts. Operational delegation can reduce repeated approvals, provided that reporting, escalation and oversight are retained. Procedures should state where requests go, what documentation is required and when a decision can be expected.

4.6 Common contracting creates value when the contract is designed for common use

A signed agreement for external support to the strategic plan provides a concrete illustration. The September 2025 document identifies EU-CONEXUS as the client and is accepted on behalf of the AISBL. Its specific conditions address use and external dissemination of the results, liability, termination, and Belgian law and jurisdiction. The specific conditions modify the provider's general template. [10, pp. 2 and 7–8]

The demonstrated result is the ability to commission an Alliance-wide service through a common counterpart with explicit contractual terms. It is not evidence, by itself, of a particular saving, faster procurement or delivery of every promised result. Nevertheless, it shows that the association's operational contribution can extend beyond moving money between partners.

The transferable lesson is to specify who will use the deliverables and on what terms before signing. For consultancy, software or other shared services, contract review should address access by member institutions, publication or reuse, acceptance of outputs, support, termination and continuity. The entity's name on the invoice does not establish that all members have the necessary rights.

Procurement also needs its own process. The interview's account of revised legal advice supports advance verification of the applicable obligations; it does not support the claim that creating an AISBL removes public-procurement requirements. The practical objective is a proportionate, understood and consistently applied purchasing route—not an assumption that common purchasing is automatically exempt or faster. [5, 10:41–12:20]

4. Lessons learnt: people, data and academic functions

4.7 A common staffing model is an organisational project in its own right

Staffing was a major next step identified by the former leadership. The interview distinguishes direct recruitment from an arrangement in which a university employs a person and provides a service to the association. It also clarifies that postdoctoral recruitment was an area for investigation. The Description of the Action similarly refers to exploring joint or shared human-resources models. [5, 19:12–20:26; 1, T1.3]

The later LevelUP proposal retains progressive transfer of coordination staff to the AISBL as a next step. That is evidence of a development direction, not proof that all staff have already changed employer. Organisational leadership, reporting lines, workplace and the legal employer must therefore be described separately in any account of the pilot. [11, p. 18]

For each proposed role, EU-CONEXUS should compare direct employment, university-hosted employment with an agreed service arrangement, and other legally appropriate options. The comparison should address supervision, professional development, continuity, total cost and the practical consequences of where the person works. Cross-border tax, social-security and employment questions require role-specific advice; the existence of a common legal person should not be assumed to settle them. ESEU identifies these interfaces as persistent issues in transnational cooperation. [13, pp. 9 and 12–18]

4.8 Common digital administration is not automatic ownership or academic authority

The pilot's context includes shared digital services, flexible study offers, research cooperation and common communication. However, the transcript does not establish that intellectual-property ownership across these activities was systematically transferred to the AISBL. One possible assignment was recalled but not confirmed; the consortium agreement and possible shared licences were also mentioned. A general claim of association ownership would therefore exceed the evidence. [5, 31:21–33:05]

For a common platform or commissioned output, the recommended record should identify the contracting organisation, intellectual-property or licence holder, users' access rights, data responsibilities, maintenance arrangements and exit provisions. Existing arrangements should be documented before new transfers are proposed. Joint financing alone should not be used as proof of shared ownership.

An equivalent distinction is needed in education. A common administrative entity can support programme development or organise a service connected with certification, but neither its establishment nor the technical use of a digital credential demonstrates that it has become a recognised degree-awarding institution. The report does not claim that the AISBL has acquired such status. The amended action's digital-credential milestone is a planned evidence point, not by itself proof of issuance or recognition. [1, WP3 and milestone 14; 13, pp. 9–10 and 19–21]

> **Transferable lesson: distinguish the service operator, the rights holder, the data-responsible organisation and the academically responsible institution. These roles may cooperate without being identical.**

4. Lessons learnt: continuity and organisational learning

4.9 Financial sustainability requires more than continuing legal existence

The association gives the partnership a structure that is not limited to one project period. Its practical continuity nevertheless depends on resources for the functions retained. The interview identifies membership contributions as an initial basis and discusses sponsorship, private funding and a possible fund or foundation as development ideas. It does not substantiate an established diversified income portfolio or a separately constituted foundation. [6, institutional commitment; 5, 16:11–21:57 and 26:34–27:17]

A sustainability assessment should therefore distinguish the minimum cost of keeping the association compliant, the resources needed to maintain useful services, and the additional expenditure required for new activities. Restricted project funding, committed member contributions and prospective income should not be treated as interchangeable. A large pipeline of possible opportunities is not equivalent to secured cash for payroll, service renewals or other recurring commitments.

The proposed financial approach is a rolling multi-year forecast, with a clearly identified core service package and scenarios for changes in income. Each potential new revenue activity should be considered with its delivery costs, responsibility, contractual conditions and applicable tax treatment. Creating another legal structure should follow a demonstrated functional need; the earlier discussion of a fund is not, on its own, evidence that a second entity is required.

4.10 Institutional memory and evaluation should outlast individual appointments

The interview itself illustrates the difficulty of reconstructing decisions after leadership changes: the participants were unable to locate some early records, recalled certain costs approximately and differed in their recollection of an intellectual-property matter. Preserving the rationale behind choices is therefore an operational need, not merely a reporting exercise. [5, 00:43–01:41, 11:32–12:20 and 31:21–34:22]

Later institutional records offer an example of a more explicit commitment trail. The July 2026 declarations from all members endorsing the common mission and identify the Strategic Plan 2026–2030, adopted by the Governing Board in December 2025, as the shared implementation framework. These documents demonstrate recorded endorsement by those institutions; they are not used to infer the status of every other member’s internal approvals. [12]

The recommended institutional record should connect decisions, delegations, service specifications, contracts, funding conditions and review outcomes. It should also record why an option was not pursued and what would justify reconsidering it. A structured handover should include open obligations and pending decisions, not just contact lists and meeting minutes.

Evaluation should ask whether users can obtain services reliably, whether responsibilities are understood and whether common arrangements improve cooperation. The association’s contribution should be assessed alongside that of partner universities and other funded actions. The pilot provides a credible account of organisational development, but the available evidence does not justify attributing all Alliance achievements to the legal entity.

5. ESEU: a functional framework for the findings

5.1 What the ESEU roadmap contributes

The Erasmus+ project “A European Status for ECIU University” (ESEU) ran from March 2023 to February 2024. Its roadmap, published on 28 February 2024, combines a needs analysis, examination of legal structures, national-context work and stakeholder discussions. EU-CONEXUS participated as an associated partner, and the report acknowledges Isabella Baer-Eiselt’s contribution. It is therefore a directly relevant source of comparative learning, rather than an unrelated model imported into the pilot. [13, pp. 2–5]

The roadmap’s stakeholder analysis covers learners, staff, university leadership, public authorities and wider ecosystems. Its benefits are largely prospective: they describe what an appropriate cooperation instrument could facilitate, not outcomes proven for every existing association. For EU-CONEXUS, this distinction makes it possible to explain the intended user benefit without claiming that establishment alone delivered it. [13, pp. 8–11]

ESEU discusses three scenarios: continued reliance on existing arrangements, a new European instrument, and adaptation of an existing instrument. The report’s discussion and proposals belong to the 2024 policy context. They are not treated here as enacted reforms, nor as a recommendation that EU-CONEXUS should change legal form. Its functional comparison is used to identify which activities need further operational evidence. [13, pp. 12–18 and 29–30]

5.2 Applying the eight use cases to EU-CONEXUS

ESEU function	Evidence in the EU-CONEXUS pilot	Lesson / implication
1. Hiring staff	The interview and T1.3 address possible models; the 2026 proposal describes progressive staff transfer as a next step. [5; 1; 11]	Separate the established coordination role from the employment arrangements needed to sustain it.
2. Receiving public and private funding	Beneficiary status and a grant allocation are documented. Membership contributions are described; a diversified private-income stream is not established. [3; 5]	Identify restrictions and obligations for each source rather than treating all funds as freely interchangeable.
3. Flexible learning paths at European level	Educational cooperation is part of the action; selected administrative support is envisaged through the association. No independent degree-awarding status is evidenced. [1; 5]	Assess administrative support separately from academic approval, quality assurance and recognition.
4. Revenue from continuing education	Continuing education and economic-model development appear in Alliance planning. The evidence does not provide realised AISBL revenue from these activities. [1, WP14; 5]	Test an economic model and delivery responsibilities before relying on prospective income for core costs.

Functions follow ESEU, pp. 19–20. “Evidence not established” identifies a limit of this assessment, not a finding that the activity has never taken place. Proposed implications are the analysis of this report.

5. ESEU: resources, services and implementation

ESEU function	Evidence in the EU-CONEXUS pilot	Lesson / implication
5. Investment in and management of facilities	The Alliance's mission envisages access to shared research infrastructure. The interview refers to possible joint infrastructure, but does not establish AISBL ownership or operation of facilities. [6; 5]	Clarify whether the intended role is ownership, access coordination, service purchase or joint investment; these are different arrangements.
6. Data-related issues	The amended action provides for a distributed Smart Campus unit and common digital services. The evidence set does not contain a complete allocation of data responsibilities. [1, T1.6]	Assign responsibilities for each system and process; centralising a platform does not by itself define every data-protection role.
7. Intellectual property rights	A specific assignment was not confirmed in the interview. The signed strategic-planning contract explicitly addresses use and dissemination of its results. [5; 10]	Document rights per output or asset; do not infer comprehensive ownership from a common funding source.
8. Buying and owning goods and services	Shared purchasing is reported by former leadership and described in the 2026 proposal. A signed common-service agreement supplies a concrete example. [5; 10; 11]	Measure service outcomes and contract performance while maintaining a verified procurement route.

5.3 A staged rather than all-or-nothing assessment

Read together, the eight functions show why the pilot cannot be described simply as either "the entity works" or "the entity does not work". The evidence is strongest for establishing a common beneficiary and contracting organisation, organising shared funds and formalising responsibilities. For direct staffing, private revenue, comprehensive data arrangements and infrastructure ownership, the sources describe development directions or provide only partial evidence.

This unevenness is consistent with the sequence described by the former leadership: an initially limited instrument was expected to take on additional responsibilities as the Alliance evolved. It also explains why the report does not use the provision of a new legal status as a proxy for academic integration. A capability can be formally available yet require further delegation, resources, systems or institutional approvals before it becomes a routine service. [5, 05:34–06:11, 19:12–21:57 and 28:23–30:23]

For future reviews, the proposed functional record should distinguish four questions without collapsing them into a single score: is the function within the intended remit; is the operating arrangement agreed; is there evidence of actual delivery; and is the benefit to users demonstrated? The answers may differ for a particular function. This approach helps direct effort towards practical gaps without implying that every activity must migrate to the association.

> **ESEU is most useful here as a structured set of questions. It strengthens the interpretation of the EU-CONEXUS evidence; it cannot supply missing EU-CONEXUS payments, staffing decisions or service results.**

6. Comparative experience: different organisational choices

The following examples were selected for particular organisational features, not as a representative survey or a ranking. The sources are the organisations' own accounts or the ESEU analysis. Their structures, membership, resources and stage of development differ from EU-CONEXUS. A stated objective or legal capacity in a comparator is not treated as independently demonstrated performance.

6.1 ECIU: developing the functions of an existing foundation

ESEU's 2024 analysis discusses the continued use and further development of ECIU's Dutch foundation alongside examination of European legal instruments. It links that discussion to concrete needs such as receiving funds, staffing, learning services, infrastructure and intellectual property. It also recognises that no legal status, taken in isolation, resolves all cross-border cooperation questions. [13, pp. 12–22]

The relevance to EU-CONEXUS is functional rather than prescriptive: review which needs the existing entity can address, what supplementary arrangements are necessary, and which obstacles remain outside its control. Developing an existing structure and assessing a possible future instrument are separate exercises. The present report does not repeat ESEU's preferred policy pathway as an institutional decision for EU-CONEXUS.

6.2 Una Europa: distinguishing association governance from project governance

Una Europa's official governance account identifies a Belgian non-profit association, described as a vzw, founded in 2019. It sets out a General Assembly, Executive Committee and Board of Directors, and identifies a separate Project Steering Committee for Una.Futura. The vzw designation should not be conflated with EU-CONEXUS's AISBL form. [14]

The transferable feature is the explicit description of the relationship between an enduring organisation and a funded project. For EU-CONEXUS, this supports a clearer account of which decisions belong to the association and which arise from the Grant Agreement. The comparison does not establish that Una Europa's arrangements are less bureaucratic, nor that the same distribution of responsibilities would suit a different membership.

6.3 4EU+: a legal entity can also act as project coordinator

The official 1CORE project page records the creation of the 4EU+ registered association in 2021 and identifies it as the coordinating beneficiary of the project selected under the 2022 European Universities call. Its work plan places coordination and management with the association while assigning other work packages to universities. [15]

This offers a specific contrast with EU-CONEXUS Plus, where the association participates as a beneficiary and La Rochelle Université remains coordinator. The existence of a legal entity therefore does not determine a single funding arrangement. The operational lesson is to specify the role actually conferred, the resources attached to it and its relationship with member institutions. Coordination by the legal entity would require its own agreed allocation of responsibilities; it is not an automatic next stage implied by incorporation. [1, participant list]

6. Comparative experience: funding and common services

6.4 UNITA: a common service organisation with a different legal basis

UNITA's official account describes a European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG, or GEIE), established in January 2023 by six founding universities and based in Turin. Its stated functions include managing common services and resources, entering employment and supply contracts, participating in funding calls and supporting partnerships. These statements identify an organisational remit, not measured results for every function. [16]

The associated EGAI project examined legal and economic issues concerning personnel, data, material resources and funding. Its experimentation and proposals should not be confused with the enactment of a separate European Grouping of Academic Interest legal form. ESEU also identifies liability and institutional eligibility among the issues to examine when considering an EEIG. [17; 13, pp. 17–18]

For EU-CONEXUS, the lesson is to compare service arrangements and due-diligence questions, rather than copy the legal designation. A model used by another alliance does not establish that every EU-CONEXUS university could participate on the same terms or that the same instrument would resolve its employment and funding needs.

6.5 Eucor: separating basic coordination from programme resources

Eucor is a long-standing cross-border university grouping, not simply another Erasmus+ European Universities project. Its history places cooperation from 1989 before the development of an EGTC structure. Its published financing account distinguishes regular member contributions supporting coordination from a separate contribution to the Seed Money programme, alongside other funding sources. [18–19]

This provides an instructive distinction for EU-CONEXUS: the cost of maintaining the common organisation can be made visible separately from the resources allocated to particular joint activities. It does not make Eucor's contribution amounts or regional funding environment an appropriate benchmark for an alliance with a different geography and service portfolio. The transferable element is the separation of purposes, not replication of a fee formula.

6.6 What the comparison adds—and what it does not

Across these cases, a legal entity can be used for permanent coordination, selected shared services, project participation or coordination, and administration of distinct common funds. Those are organisational choices requiring resources and explicit delegation. The cases also show why the label "legal entity" is too broad to describe an operating model: legal form, actual functions, project role and financial arrangements all need to be specified.

The comparative material strengthens the case for evaluating the EU-CONEXUS entity through its services and responsibilities. It does not establish a universal preferred form, a guaranteed route to degree-awarding status, or automatic exemption from cross-border administrative requirements. Historical reservations about particular instruments in the interview are reported as part of the decision context, not as comprehensive legal conclusions applicable to all institutions today.

7. Proposed consolidation priorities

The following measures translate the findings into an operational follow-up. They are proposals for consideration by the competent Alliance and association bodies, not decisions already adopted or new commitments claimed under EU-CONEXUS Plus. Timing is expressed from approval of the follow-up, so it does not imply retrospective implementation.

Priority and proposed timing	Action and intended responsibility	Evidence of completion
Define the service portfolio **First 3 months**	Executive Director and relevant service leads prepare a portfolio for endorsement by the competent governance bodies. State mandate, users, funding basis, local interfaces and boundaries for each service.	Approved portfolio; named operational owners; agreed delivery standards and escalation routes.
Clarify decision and signature powers **First 3 months**	Association governance and Alliance leadership validate a decision map, including reserved powers, delegated expenditure and the capacity in which each body acts.	Current delegation and signature register; decision templates distinguishing the association, Alliance and grant consortium.
Consolidate compliance and contract records **First 6 months**	The coordination and financial-administration functions maintain a common calendar and contract register, supported by legal and other specialist advice where needed.	Documented procurement route; current contracts and renewal dates; advice record; responsibilities for tax, reporting, insurance and retention.
Develop the staffing model **First 6 months; staged implementation**	Executive Director and the relevant employing institutions prepare role-specific options for decision by the competent bodies. Check supervision, employment basis, location, costs and continuity.	Approved arrangements for each priority role; documented employer and reporting lines; handover and professional-development provisions.
Separate core and activity financing **Next annual budget cycle**	Financial-administration function and competent statutory bodies establish a multi-year forecast identifying core services, restricted funding, activity contributions and income assumptions.	Approved forecast and contribution rationale; scenarios for funding changes; visibility of commitments and available liquidity.
Review service value and continuity **Baseline within 6 months; annual review**	Service leads gather proportionate user and process evidence. Management reviews results with institutional coordinators and relevant student or staff representatives.	Service dashboard; user feedback; improvement decisions; updated institutional-memory and continuity records.

Each new function should be assessed before expansion: does it solve a defined common problem, who has approved it, how will it be resourced, what obligations follow, and what evidence would demonstrate its value? This avoids treating centralisation as an end in itself. A member-hosted service may remain appropriate where its interface with the common entity is clear and sustainable.

The proposed responsibilities are functional descriptions. They do not create statutory offices, modify the Grant Agreement, or presume that all posts currently exist as direct AISBL employment.

8. Assessing value and drawing the conclusions

8.1 A proportionate evidence base for the next review

The next assessment should connect resources with service experience rather than count legal documents alone. The following measures are proposed as a starting point; no results or target values are assigned without a baseline.

Dimension	Possible evidence	Interpretation safeguard
Service reliability	Completed requests; median processing time; overdue items; recurring causes of delay.	Compare like-for-like services and account for incomplete requests and external dependencies.
Clarity and trust	User understanding of responsibilities, budgets and procedures; recurring questions; feedback from institutional coordinators.	Distinguish formal publication from whether users can understand and apply the information.
Financial continuity	Core costs covered by committed income; liquidity against obligations; restricted and unrestricted resources.	Do not equate a grant ceiling or prospective income with cash available for continuing services.
Shared organisational value	Services commissioned for several partners; reuse of outputs; continuity across staff changes; documented reduction of duplicated work.	Quantify savings only where a comparable baseline and attributable costs are available.

8.2 Overall conclusion

The EU-CONEXUS pilot demonstrates the practical value of a common organisation for selected collective responsibilities. Beneficiary status, reported common-fund management, more formal institutional relationships and a documented Alliance-wide contract provide concrete elements of that development. The association is not only a statement of intent: it has become part of the organisation of joint activity. [1–3; 5; 10]

Its limitations are equally instructive. Incorporation did not remove the need for specialist advice, banking arrangements, procurement procedures or clearly communicated financial rules. Nor does the evidence show that every future function—direct staffing, diversified private income, infrastructure ownership or comprehensive intellectual-property management—was fully implemented during the period reviewed. These distinctions prevent a useful pilot from being evaluated against achievements it has not claimed or cannot yet substantiate. [5; 11]

The central conclusion is therefore conditional and operational: a legal entity creates a common capacity to act, but its value depends on the functions entrusted to it and the quality of their delivery. ESEU and the comparator cases help explain the range of possible functions and organisational choices; they do not remove the need for EU-CONEXUS to document its own results.

The next phase should consolidate what is already useful, make responsibilities and costs easier to understand, and develop additional functions when their mandate, resources and user benefit are clear. This approach preserves shared institutional ownership while allowing the association to evolve beyond its initial pilot role. The final M48 issue should update the evidence through the end of the contractual reporting period and retain this separation between demonstrated operation, reported experience and future development.

References and source notes

[1] EU-CONEXUS Plus / EACEA (2026). Description of the Action, Annex 1, Part A, as replaced by Amendment AMD-101089709-21, 29 May 2026. Project 101089709. Especially pp. 2–3; WP1, WP3, WP6, WP10 and WP14; deliverable D1.6, p. 37; and milestones 13–14. Project record supplied for this report.

[2] EU-CONEXUS Plus / EACEA (2026). Description of the Action, Annex 1, Part B, amended version. Especially the change log of 29 August 2022, consortium set-up, and the 2026 revisions to project-development support. Project record supplied for this report.

[3] EU-CONEXUS Plus / EACEA. Grant Agreement, project 101089709: Data Sheet and articles 5–7, 11 and 20. Consolidated convenience version supplied in the project archive. The document itself states that the originally signed agreement and formal amendments remain legally binding.

[4] La Rochelle Université / EACEA (2026). Amendment request and Amendment AMD-101089709-21, 29 May 2026. In particular changes 1–5 concerning WP6 and WP10 and the replacement of Annex 1. Project records supplied for this report.

[5] EU-CONEXUS. Retrospective discussion on lessons learnt from the legal entity, with Isabella Baer-Eiselt and Laura Delvaux and members of the coordination team. Undated transcript supplied as “Lessons_learned_legal_entity-transcript.txt”. Citations refer to recording timestamps. Internal qualitative source; the transcript is not reproduced as a public annex.

[6] EU-CONEXUS. Mission Statement: Joint Vision and Mission; Joint Values; Joint Long-Term Strategy. Especially institutional commitment, coordination staff and the four university missions. Approved mission document supplied for this report; used for its stated commitments rather than as a record of completed implementation.

[7] EU-CONEXUS. Published notarial attestation and bilingual statutory text. Attestation dated 18 July 2022, recording the constitutive deed of 14 July 2022. Statutory references use article numbers. The published file is used as an establishment record, not certified here as the latest consolidated statutes. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[8] EU-CONEXUS AISBL (2022). Minutes of the Annual General Assembly, 10 October 2022, and attendance list. Public record of appointments and admission of AUA and SETU. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[9] EU-CONEXUS (2025). Strategic Workshop of the Governing Board, Limassol, 14 May 2025: record of decisions. Used for governance, implementation and strategic-prioritisation discussion; not treated as proof that all suggestions were implemented. Internal governance record supplied for this report.

[10] EU-CONEXUS AISBL and Management Solutions (2025). Professional collaboration proposal for the EU-CONEXUS Strategic Plan, dated 5 September 2025; signed document. Especially acceptance, p. 2, and specific contractual conditions, pp. 7–8. Internal contract reviewed; commercially sensitive details are not reproduced.

[11] EU-CONEXUS (2026). EU-CONEXUS LevelUP, proposal 101330940, Part B. Especially p. 18, financial management and the association’s role, and the consortium set-up section. Supplied file archived in July 2026. Used as a consortium self-description and statement of future direction, not a record of next-phase implementation.

[12] Klaipėda University (14 July 2026) and South East Technological University (13 July 2026). Institutional endorsements of the EU-CONEXUS Joint Mission Statement and Strategic Plan 2026–2030, for proposal 101330940. Both identify Governing Board adoption of the Strategic Plan in December 2025. Signed institutional records in the supplied file archive.

[13] Wessels, O., and Craciun, D. (2024). Roadmap on a European legal instrument for transnational higher education cooperation. ESEU, Work Package 3, Deliverable 3.1, 28 February 2024. Especially pp. 3–5 (method and partners), 8–11 (stakeholders), 12–18 (scenarios), 19–22 (functions and legal structures), and 29–30 (conclusions). User-supplied PDF; project page below. Source

[14] Una Europa. Governance. Official description of the association and of the relationship between its governance and the Una.Futura Project Steering Committee. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[15] 4EU+. 1CORE: One Comprehensive Research-Intensive European University. Official project description and work-package responsibilities. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[16] UNITA. UNITA GEIE. Official account of the European Economic Interest Grouping, its establishment and stated functions. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[17] UNITA. EGAI. Official account of the European Grouping of Academic Interest policy-experimentation project. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[18] Eucor – The European Campus. Funding of the alliance. Official description distinguishing basic coordination resources, Seed Money contributions and other funding. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[19] Eucor – The European Campus. History of cooperation. Official chronology of the cross-border university grouping and its development. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

[20] EU-CONEXUS. EU-CONEXUS AISBL. Official explanation of the association's purpose and Belgian location. Used for organisational rationale, not for the page's potentially outdated list of individual office-holders. Accessed 17 September 2026. Source

Source handling

Public web sources were consulted for the organisational features cited. Their descriptions are not independent performance audits. Internal project records are identified for traceability but are not reproduced. The proposed actions and interpretation of the evidence are the analysis of this deliverable.