

ERA POLICY BRIEF

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TOPIC: IBA-SWAFS-SUPPORT-2-2020
PROJECT: EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY ALLIANCE
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION ACTION (ENHANCERIA)



SCOPE OF THE POLICY BRIEF

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

Policy background:

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

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

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

FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS

1. Encountered **challenges** in ENHANCE regarding cooperation between universities in the field of R&I in relation to the institutional change areas (transformation modules).

[ENHANCE](#) is an alliance of strong European universities of technology and through the project [ENHANCERIA](#) is targeting many of the transformation modules defined by the European Commission. ENHANCE has four defined R&I focus areas in this project: 1) sustainable development through transdisciplinary research, 2) sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems, 3) HR and career development, and 4) research infrastructures.

The European Universities require **a new way of working** with strategic and structural collaboration in a pan-European setting. Many of the challenges we have experienced so far in our collaboration are relatively generic across areas, and will likely encounter in many Alliances and international consortia. Universities have institutional and academic autonomy, and across the seven ENHANCE member universities and six countries the **contextual, institutional and cultural nuances are noticeable and enrich the Alliance**. The **degree of**

synergy and permeability across education, research and innovation, across different units in the universities and across sectors, differ widely. This also makes it challenging to **identify and engage contributors** into joint activities, as the **internal structures and governance practices are very different from university to university.** The strategic focus of the involved universities also varies, something that leads to **diversity in practices and maturity within various approaches and areas** in the universities. The perspectives and maturity with regards to **equality, diversity and inclusion** vary a great deal from country to country. The **academic years** of the universities are not similar. The result of this diversity manifests in unique approaches to institutional change areas, that can make joint work across the universities challenging. In implementing new ways of working within joint R&I activities, we also foresee possible legal barriers related to the different areas, e.g. research infrastructures and human resources.

The contextual situations and perspectives of the universities also contribute to a **diversity of understanding** related to many of the collaborative areas, which challenges common understanding. One example here is transdisciplinarity which is understood very differently within universities and between the universities, ranging from some kind of collaboration between two disciplines to innovative co-creational practices bringing together disciplines and sectors. The same applies to the other focus areas in ENHANCERIA.

The ambition for transformational change within the alliances and their member universities is high, in particular considering the limited timeframe of the project funding. A steady stream of new strategic documents and expectations, through the European strategy for universities, the renewed European Research Area and the European Innovation Agenda also requires **continuous development and re-development.** Transforming such a collaboration **from a project to a long-term alliance collaboration is also a process that needs to mature and be nurtured over time.** ENHANCE acknowledges the identified challenges and lessons from the recent study requested by the [CULT Committee to the European Parliament: The European Universities Initiative: First lessons, main challenges and perspectives.](#)

2. How ENHANCE has tackled or intend to **tackle these challenges**, and **good practices** to be shared with stakeholders and policy makers.

ENHANCE offers a platform for exchange of best practices between its member universities and acts as a sandbox to develop new approaches, practices and methodologies across the universities and regions the universities are located in. A lot of time and effort have been spent on **identifying and trying to engage the right people and units in the universities**, and this is an ongoing process that needs continuous attention.

To bridge the differences and to find common ground we are **bringing people together and mapping practices, approaches and methodologies** at the different universities, and setting these in a wider societal context of strategic policy at European, national, regional and institutional level. We use the process steps described in box 1, but we experience that there is **not one way** in practice to do this across the focus areas we have in ENHANCERIA. Based on the mappings, best practices are highlighted and shared, and pave the way for joint collaborative efforts in the focus areas. Many such collaborative efforts are expected to lead to recommendations for implementation and supporting resources for implementation in the individual universities. These processes enable cross-institutional learning, benefitting both the institutions that have high maturity within a specific thematic area, and those who are relatively new to the topics (examples include career development plans; equality, diversity and inclusion plans; managing and supporting excellent research infrastructures).

Box 1: Aspects of development in ENHANCERIA

1. Identify, map and connect
2. Compare, exchange and learn
3. Analyse, synthesise and reflect
4. Develop models, approaches, lessons learned and recommendations
5. Develop common strategies and action plans
6. Implement
7. Spread and widen
8. Identify opportunities for further development and funding

The **diversity of the ENHANCE universities can be a challenge, but is also a strength and value of the alliance.** This diversity enables a broader perspective on R&I to be adopted by the involved contributors as well as the institutions as a whole. Most practices and methodologies are highly contextual and not easily transferrable from one location to another. Setting aside enough time and resources to understand each other's perspectives, and limitations to each other practices, are key to success and common learning and potential implementation. We also have to **respect the institutional autonomy** of the universities with regard to

implementation. In the Alliance, we are introducing programmes to promote cross-border entrepreneurship and innovation, we are enhancing language proficiency, especially English, and encouraging communication with national policy makers to align relevant strategies across national borders. Outcome from ENHANCERIA is published on the ENHANCE website, and we are actively participating in the FOREU2 activity groups that bridge across the European University Alliances.

3. 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.

It is still early in the collaboration, and limited institutional changes are so far introduced at the individual member universities and as an Alliance within the R&I dimension, but these are foreseen in the coming years. One and a half year into the collaboration **a common knowledge base and joint understanding are established** in all of the focus areas (examples are sample of transdisciplinary practices and case studies; sample of sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation initiatives; current state-of-the-practice on HR; and research infrastructure portfolio). This enables joint efforts, and potential transfer of good practices from one setting to another.

The diversity of perspectives towards the four focus areas have also **enabled reflections that provide useful insights for designing and implementing new approaches and practices** in the individual institutions, e.g. within collaborating with different societal stakeholders in transdisciplinary practices like living labs or co-creational spaces; and introducing new programmes that support approaches towards diversity, equality and inclusion. One of the member universities has implemented a **gender equality plan, a policy against unequal treatment and harassment** and set up **an office for social responsibility** at the university. The joint efforts within **research infrastructures** have led to further development of institutional communications, support, management and booking systems to increase visibility and findability at some of the universities.

ENHANCE has also **established a regular meeting for our Vice Presidents for Research**. This enables high level leadership to have open and strategic discussions on R&I activities within ENHANCE and potentially find alignment in different thematic areas or topics.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, the European Universities pilot Alliances make recommendations in relation to the policy topics identified below.

1. Policy topic 1: facilitating transnational cooperation

Increased transnational cooperation and seamless mobility are ambitions of all the European Universities, including ENHANCE. One clear challenge in Europe is the variety of academic semesters and years, which make educational collaboration, student mobility and finding joint timing for events challenging. A harmonisation or more aligning of academic years across Europe would be a clear benefit at a European level, but not necessarily nationally due to cultural and structural variations between countries.

ENHANCE is **analysing the potential added value a unique legal statute for European Universities**, as pooling researchers, capacities and strengths also is possible in a distributed organisation form. To explore this further, ENHANCE is following the current developments and is setting up a Legal Entity Task Force. A possible legal entity must continue to be a voluntary organisational form the European Universities themselves decide on. Research and innovation collaboration requires our universities to collaborate with a wide variety of different institutions from many countries, varying from project to project and activity to activity. As such, it is important that the **European Universities are open, accessible and do not become overly exclusive organisations**, in order to pursue the ambitions of a stronger and more competitive Europe as a whole, and contribute to collaborative solutions that benefit a broader European and global knowledge and innovation sector.

2. Policy topic 2: strengthening careers

ENHANCE was one of the alliances that signed the expression of interest to the agreement to reform research assessment in 2021/22. Several of the ENHANCE university members have signed the agreement, committing to the principles, developed by CoARA in 2022. Career development and HR is one of the focus areas of ENHANCERIA. Moving from a publish-or-perish culture to a more holistic culture of assessing research and researcher career assessment are processes that will take time, and should follow the principles set out in the agreement on reforming research assessment. **To encourage a more holistic assessment of research, we recommend that the European Commission should design supporting measures** through coordination and support actions in Horizon Europe, have supporting resources, and incorporates principles in the HRS4R, and not only focus on compliance.

Tenure-track positions can represent a good way for talented researchers to pursue a career in academia. Universities are also competing for talent, and tenure-track positions with requirements for international mobility can help to build a more mobile research workforce. Tenure-track positions can also be a tool to reduce the use of temporary positions in academia, depending on the design of the tenure-tracks. We do not have an overview of how tenure track positions are used from institution to institution or country to country at the moment. We would recommend that the European Commission **conducts a Europe-wide analysis of the different frameworks for tenure-track positions and the expressed need** from the different member states, associated countries and stakeholders related to tenure-track positions before proposing measures for a European model.

3. Policy topic 3: digital transition

As an alliance of universities of technology, ENHANCE contributes to the digital transition of Europe through all core missions of the universities. Both the European strategy for universities and the European Innovation Agenda, in addition to national strategies, highlights the universities' roles in contributing into the digital transition.

In relation to open science and e-infrastructures, the developments connected to the European Open Science Cloud are promising, but not enough. Institutions need to ensure **good systems and services for researchers and users of research data**, and a major challenge is related to **data curation and data stewardship**.

To ensure broad support and actions towards digital transition and more open data beyond what is already being done, **sufficient funding for necessary activities** must be made available from the European Commission, member states and associated countries.

4. Policy topic 4: access to excellence

ENHANCE sees the European University Initiatives as one measure towards giving access to excellence. In recent funding calls, ENHANCE has registered that efforts directed towards the European Excellence Initiative are focused more towards the Eastern member states and not the whole of Europe. To have effective and reciprocal initiatives for developing excellence in R&I, including support functions, measures should be targeting all of Europe as there are important learning points across universities. It would be better to have criteria related to **geographic or regional balance, rather than specific regions**.

Potential initiatives also need to **acknowledge the diversity of institutions and contexts**, and encourage developing excellence regardless of status and starting point, and starting with the institutions themselves. To have a broader impact and reach, potential initiatives could be supported through the European Universities, the European University Association, CESAER (Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research), EARMA (European Association of Research Managers and Administrators) and similar umbrella organisations. As the majority of the Higher Education Institutions in Europe are not part of alliances under the auspices of the European University Initiative, any **initiatives need to be open to all Higher Education Institutions in Europe**, also exploring global collaboration.

5. Policy topic 5: increasing global competitiveness

The geopolitical landscape in 2023 is very different from the situation only ten years ago, and has become more challenging, competitive, and mistrustful. Global challenges still require global approaches in knowledge development. Emerging economies and high income countries outside Europe have elite universities with vast resources, and more non-academic institutions have become more research-intensive in nature. [R&D spending](#) in EU countries is on average below the OECD average, and far behind countries like Israel, South Korea and the USA. When comparing [researchers in R&D per million people](#), the EU average is at the OECD level but behind South Korea and the USA, while the Nordics are considerably above the EU average. If there is a clear connection between university rankings and quality, we could also claim there is a clear connection between available resources and ranking position.

European universities are based on European values and are in many countries strongly embedded in their regional societies, and address a continuum of needs that span from local to global. European universities have a long history of contributing to innovation, societal and industrial transition, are well positioned to contribute to the European Green Deal and the current Missions, and have a long tradition of collaboration towards common societal goals.

If one aim is to increase the relative weight at global level of research-intensive universities in Europe, extensive resources need to be re-allocated to R&D and specifically research in universities across Europe through the EC, member states and associated states. This will require significant investment and political re-prioritisations, and it will require recruitment from the global talent base. Some European success stories are pan-European efforts like the framework programmes for research and innovation, the European Research Council (ERC), European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI), European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) and within innovation ecosystems the Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). The ERC report on [Frontier research for the European Green Deal](#) demonstrates the importance of bottom-up ground-breaking curiosity-driven research to address societal challenges and ambitions.

Ground-breaking research can lead to radical innovations, including social innovations and new ways of working. In turn, this can lead to increased societal value creation, contributing to the twin transitions, and increased competitiveness of Europe. ENHANCE supports instruments that bridges ground-breaking research and innovation, such as the ERC Proof-of-concept, EIC Transition and Accelerator, and would welcome more instruments and incentives that facilitates increased research-based innovation.

Building on successful models from Europe, a European approach to global competitiveness needs to be embedded in the European Excellence Initiative. This needs to be part of the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the foreseen European Innovation Area. As the EU is committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, it also needs to ensure that no-one is left behind, while at the same time focusing its resources. ENHANCE would recommend that the European Commission do not initiate additional programmes to enable this, but instead **strengthens already existing and planned initiatives and strategies and synergies between them to strengthen impact and competitiveness, concretely by increasing available funding.**

6. Other recommendations

To develop sustainable long-term strategic and structural collaboration across institutions and countries, as in the European University Alliances, **a shift is needed going from project-based funding schemes to more long-term, sustainable funding solutions.** This could among other initiatives be through a new partnership co-funded by Horizon Europe and member and associated countries directed towards strengthening the R&I component of European Universities. This also requires closer collaboration between the funding agencies, enabling synergies and closer integration between education, research and innovation; and more scalability and flexibility of activities within the collaborations.



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