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TOPIC: SUPPORT FOR THE RESEARCH AND
INNOVATION DIMENSION OF
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES (PART II)

TRANSFORM4EUROPEAN RESEARCH AND
INNOVATION (T4ERI)
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ERA Policy Brief

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Feedback on Progress (max 1.5 p)

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

DIVERSE INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS, COMMUNICATION, LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

- Disparity in institutional structures: Institutions function and manage responsibility for their tasks differently and have different approaches to management. Furthermore, the stakeholders involved (administrative units, researchers) act with different degrees of autonomy. Thus, sometimes coordinators lack the procedural/ technical means to implement certain tasks directly, and finding alternative paths has caused delays.
- Challenges in communication are partly due to the disparity in the institutional structures and in the internal positions of the project managers and actors.
- Different internal legal frameworks have also led to delays, e.g., timelines had to be adjusted due to codetermination procedures in data-collection which had not been foreseen by the task leader.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND RESOURCES DEVOTED AT INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

- The member universities have in some cases differing notions about their role and responsibilities in the Alliance.
- There is an imbalance of the human resources dedicated additionally (from own funds) to the project activities and concerning the involvement of high-level decision-makers: In some universities, decisions are made at middle management level and thus are less impactful than decisions taken at a higher level.

SCIENTIFIC CAREERS: NATIONAL REGULATIONS; STATUS OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS

- National legislation and university regulations regulate the employment of scientists in a variety of ways that make it difficult to identify the exact reasons impeding career growth.
- Young scholars have different levels of independence in their research, being closely related to their promoter and chair, and face a paucity of opportunities to explore their ideas.

DATA COLLECTION

- Data collecting is one of the biggest issues, caused by differences in internal regulations and the lack of incentives for potential participants to fill in surveys or take part in interviews.

UNEVEN STAKEHOLDERS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- There has been little stakeholder involvement in the T4ERI project so far, which is due to the absence of a visible service and partnership chances specifically oriented at business, because the first phase of the project was more dedicated to establishing structures than generating tangible concrete results.
- The varying geographical and activity specificities of external stakeholders, as well as the disparities in policy experience and various levels of active stakeholder participation, in combination with complicated university processes, are another challenge to external stakeholder engagement.
- For Public Engagement in Research and Innovation, challenges relate to variances in the institutions' active public engagement policies and in differences in the approach and the experience of putting it into practice.

DIFFERENCES IN ACADEMIC CALENDAR

- Different semester schedules result in shifted time intervals where personnel are scarce.

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

- ✓ Communication is the key! Establish trustful relationships that allow for openness and transparency through regular meetings (online and face-to-face). Offer additional training to improve (intercultural) communication and language skills.
- ✓ Stay flexible and apply agile project management.
- ✓ Apply a participatory approach to decision-making processes, including sharing knowledge, best practice and experiences to find the most suitable solutions.
- ✓ Organize round tables allowing a multidimensional approach to issues and consultation on proposed solutions to make sure they are relevant to the context and all partners.
- ✓ Reserve specific funding for stakeholder mobility within the alliance to build partnerships on project events that can lead to short-term assignments and/or joint R&D projects.
- ✓ Support young pre-postdoc researchers in taking part in mentoring and observation of senior colleagues in another alliance country, allowing them to step into independence and pursue their research ideas. Erasmus+ funds can be used for trips of more than a week.

- ✓ T4ERI is developing a partnering tool and researcher database from the alliance's universities to encourage research collaboration and networking within the alliance, thus enhancing its relevance.
- 3. Please describe the tangible progress that individual partners as well as the Alliance as whole have made in terms of introducing changes in their entities as a result of this project. Please elaborate on whether the inclusive and integrated cooperation approach of your alliance helps accelerate institutional change of all partners (e.g. through sharing of practices from institutions with expertise or infrastructure in specific areas to institutions without).

The participation in the Transform4Europe alliance as such has engendered institutional change at all partners', from creating a dedicated vice-rector position (UniTS) to creating an Institutional Project Management Office (UA), and has accelerated transformation in many fields, e.g., digitalisation, professional development or the administration of student mobility. The collaboration of the management staff of the two projects (Erasmus+ initiative and T4ERI), that has been considerably intensified despite the fact that they are in many cases located in different units of their university, has contributed to strengthening the internal communication and cooperation of different units in general and to enhancing the meaning of internationalisation as a transversal task for the institution.

The sharing of best practices and the involvement in the T4ERI project has, e.g., resulted in Saarland University enhancing their Open Science strategy and activities.

Policy recommendations (max 3 pages)

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

1. Policy topic 1: facilitating transnational cooperation

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

The Transform4Europe alliance aspires to spark systemic, structural, and long-term institutionalized collaboration across the participating higher education institutions. The T4ERI project, supported by Horizon 2020, is dedicated to contributing to the research and innovation dimension as a complement to the Erasmus+ action Transform4Europe geared toward supporting higher education cooperation models.

A legal statute for the alliance would facilitate accessing, sharing and pooling joint resources - such as financial, human, digital and physical resources, and services. We are thus looking forward to the creation of a legal statute which is planned in the follow-up Erasmus+ initiative.

2. Policy topic 2: strengthening careers

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

The creation of a European model system, or at least its implementation, seems difficult given the variety of systems in place in the different member states. However, strategic institutional partnerships like the European university alliances represent a good framework for introducing joint guidelines and sharing best practices for training opportunities, support services and career guidance for the upskilling of early-stage researchers. Some universities can rely on their HRS4R Action Plan. Based on the requirements analyses and competency model, all universities offer internal training programmes with various types of activities (e.g., a career-based staff development system as well as a staff position system that is linked to the motivating system or boosting collaboration between the institutions' transfer technology office and industry).

More specifically, the recommended BEST PRACTICES in the area of R&I staff development to transfer at the alliance level are as follows:

- EKA - staff exchange mobility and common seminars for project personnel on various topics related to R&I management,
- UNISOFIA - involving leading researchers to attract young talents,
- UNITS - analysis of the trend of indicators relating to the recruitment of teaching staff, implementation of quality standards the purposes of research quality assessments,
- USAAR - development of a quality assurance system for young researchers that comprises standards for supervision, research integrity and career development,
- UA - UA Delegation Unit for Links with the Society; UA Alumni Programme, UA Senior Programme, Institutional Funding Programme,
- USIL - minimum one joint development programme for R&I staff, training and a programme for data stewards and science communicators, strengthening the competences for scientific communication, data management and promoting open science, cooperation between technology brokers (TTO) and academics on the alliance level,

- VMU - researchers' salary promotion system, research management system (VMU CRIS).

In light of the policy process on the reform of assessment of research and institutions, what are your recommendations on how to address academic/researcher career assessment?

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3. Policy topic 3: digital transition

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

In some instances, institutions rely on partially obsolete IT and digital systems that are not properly protected or integrated in order to offer the interoperability necessary to optimize university operations and improve end-user experience. Some universities are particularly challenged by the digital transformation because they lack clear IT governance — a framework that ensures information technology is used effectively and efficiently in support of organizational goals.

Significant organisational changes are sometimes a *sine qua non* condition to deliver true digital transition. IT solutions and digital procedures have often been extremely customized, and institutions are usually unable to take use of predefined self-service and integration features of new software. Additionally, these one-of-a-kind processes need extensive upkeep and care. The institution's commitment to digital transition, understanding the importance of altering procedures to effectively use technology, and attention on the users' experience are crucial to success.

Another barrier is attracting and retaining the personnel needed to implement and support the technology needed; the conditions in public service are often not attractive for them.

The collaboration in an institutional partnership like the European universities can on the one hand sharpen or highlight the challenges, and on the other hand also accelerate coping with them by pointing to crucial aspects and providing best practices.

To overcome the above-mentioned challenges, European University Alliances should benchmark their technology and procedures, then go through the following stages:

- *Stabilization* which includes upgrading systems to the latest versions, strengthening the network, increasing bandwidth, closing security gaps and risks, and enhancing end-user assistance.
- *Standardization*, looking for new methods to save money and enhance efficiency using their now-stabilized core technical infrastructure. This step consists of removing redundant systems, implementing governance to ensure that objectives are aligned, reducing customization, and migrating data.
- *Optimization* of technology to automate time-consuming manual activities, utilize resources, and deliver on the automation and efficiency that technology typically promises, allowing professors and staff to give students with speedier, more predictable, and customized experiences.
- *Transformation*, deploying transformational technologies that allow them to use linked data to drive choices via predictive analytics.

The process that leads to a comprehensive digital transition at alliance-level being more complex, it needs more coordination and time for implementation than on individual institutional level. Thus, alliances would particularly benefit from financial incentives / structural funding and support.

Also at the European level, support could be provided to capitalize on existing systems and help mainstream reliable solutions that comply with, e.g., data protection regulations, as not only digital needs and gaps must be met but also, solutions need to be compliant with the legislation at national and European level.

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

No. It would be better to capitalize on the existing infrastructures and their uses and applications as many institutions are not yet fully aware of their potential. The extended use of the European Open Science Cloud should be enough if done broadly across Europe.

4. Policy topic 4: access to excellence

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

Universities in the alliance should establish digital and/or analogous excellence hubs where different best practices can jointly generate ideas and practices for various areas of university/educational life, such as teaching and learning, research infrastructure, and support.

To support outstanding research, universities should ensure the exchange of people, knowledge, and tools. In practical terms, specific funding should be devoted for students, researchers, and staff to visit partner universities. Another important element is research-based education.

The alliances of the European Universities Initiative meet the criterion of geographical balance, thus guaranteeing access to excellence to HEI across the entire ERA. Research and Innovation should be integral parts of the Initiative to continue to strengthen these deep institutional partnerships.

5. Policy topic 5: increasing global competitiveness

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

Researchers should find it easier and more appealing to collaborate across European universities. This should begin very early in their academic career (for example late BA or early MA stage, research-based education), given that young academics have the potential to become key actors in scientific brilliance in the future. Collaboration should be encouraged at all career levels. In addition to the regular Erasmus+ exchange programmes for students, it would be prudent to sponsor small research projects at early career levels.

A common target for all members across European universities is to support different small or large research projects on various career stages, for example graduate schools, research centers etc. This can be very well coupled with EU objectives, as long as the topic allows all different types of alliances and HEI to take part in the Initiative.

6. Other recommendations

n.a.