

# ERA POLICY BRIEF

CALL: H2020-IBA-SwafS-Support-2-2020

TOPIC: IBA-SwafS-Support-2-2020

PROJECT: Beyond European University to Earth and Humanity (Beyond UNIVERSEH) [universeh.eu/research/](https://universeh.eu/research/)



## 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 institutionalized cooperation between higher education institutions. As a complement to the Erasmus+ action geared towards supporting higher education cooperation models, Horizon 2020 support is dedicated to contributing to the research and innovation dimension of the alliances between European universities, in line with their shared, integrated, long-term joint strategy and in synergy with their education dimension.

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

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

## FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS (MAX 1.5P)

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

With *Beyond UNIVERSEH*, the European University Alliance UNIVERSEH aims to create the research and innovation pillar of its university aside its other pillar dedicated to education, complementing the knowledge triangle. It is therefore an ambitious, broad and structuring project for all the partner universities, which implies a close collaboration at all levels (policy and governance, professors and researchers, administration).

After a year and a half of project, even if it is complex to take a step back so early on such a vast project, we can identify the main challenges and obstacles that we are facing.

Despite a common, albeit broad, thematic field and previous collaborations between some partners, we have observed that it remains **complicated to establish a common research policy with different local research**

**priorities, asynchronous research activities and research programmes.** Therefore, this necessarily requires:

- to integrate the project into the institution's political priorities to help identify and support the project internally and to mobilise resources
- a long-term approach and sustainable funding to develop a common roadmap that would give more perspective and visibility to institutions for which more than 60% of their research funding comes from external sources.

Moreover, one of the main challenges we must face is the **constant and sustainable involvement of researchers in such a large and structuring project, but which remains under-funded regarding its ambitious objectives and in which there is no research activity *per se*.** Limited scientific output precludes substantial researchers' enrolment and collaboration. Further, as there is currently no additional funding identified to resume and consolidate the support and coordination work initiated, as was done for the education pillar, limits the perspective of the partner institutions, reducing the motivation of the actors. Thus, we anticipate a two-speed development of 'European universities' with a reduced research component in comparison to the education one.

Another important challenge lies in **structuring our work with our stakeholders, common to the UNIVERSEH project.** Indeed, to date, the Alliance relies on a large network of stakeholders composed of more than 70 entities, including space agencies, space industries, space providers, research institutions and support organisations. The aim is to make our stakeholders aware of and participate in our actions relevant and integrated to the work initiated in the framework of our E+ project. A key component of Beyond UNIVERSEH success will be to transparently install within its operations the existing scientific collaborations of the partner institutions, and foster research and innovation complementarity.

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.

To respond to the two main challenges faced by the alliance, which lie in the internal promotion of the project and the involvement of actors, particularly researchers and student researchers, the project's governance bodies (Steering Committee and Governing Board) recommend reinforcing the **promotion of the project at the internal and local levels.** Indeed, during the first half of the project, identification and inventory work was carried out, which for now is yet insufficiently prospective to attract new actors. This will take place in the second half of the project's implementation, as this is when the most important and significant achievements will be tangible for the staff.

To meet the challenge of low funding, we have **identified additional funding** that could be mobilised (national funding, Erasmus + staff mobility fund). We also streamlined our activities and travel by creating joint events between WPs and associated to the Erasmus+ project. We have also developed sturdy and encouraging bilateral cooperation axes that will allow others to join the dynamic later.

To respond to the challenge of **structuring our work together with stakeholders, we have set up working groups** that allow us to make the project's developments known and to work with them on the identified themes to ensure that our priorities remain connected to the society in which we evolve. Thus, eight working groups (Competence & skills for future, Students' activities, lifelong learning, inclusion & diversity, Social and Human Sciences, Research for Society; Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Space for all) have been created for the stakeholders, whose work will be able to feed into the actions of the UNIVERSEH and Beyond UNIVERSEH projects.

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

After a year and a half of execution, we are still at an early stage of the project to observe any progress or significant changes within the institutions on the research aspect. Indeed, we are more in the process of

identification, comparative study and stock-taking, which does not yet lead to any reforming actions within our institutions: these institutional changes may take time and invariably implied various governance levels. For now, it is a matter of selecting the directions to be taken together and the best actions to be carried out, and of knowing how we are going to implement them together.

Nevertheless, the project has made possible the **raise of awareness of the various actors and institutions on several subjects and to launch individual reflections internally or collectively at European level**. This is particularly the case for **diversity and inclusion issues**, which are still not sufficiently considered in general at the laboratory level (accessibility of laboratories for people with disabilities, lack of knowledge among university staff that there are people dedicated to gender equality and disability issues or of the existence of a gender equality plan). It was through the implementation of the questionnaires that the existing mechanisms in each university were brought to light. On this point, we created a link with the Erasmus+ project because it is through this that a specific staff week was set up to exchange good practices about inclusion and diversity. In the same line, it is also thanks to the first exchanges between the different partners that it was highlighted that the **collaborations with the private sector differed between the partners**.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (MAX 3P)

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

### 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?

To respond to the main challenges that our alliance is facing, it is fundamental for us that the development of the research component of European universities is further supported so that transnational cooperation between partners in the EU can be effective, complete, and sustainable. Through this policy brief, we follow up on the joint statement of the 41 alliances of 8 March 2022 and stress the fact that it is **crucial for us to have a perpetuation of the SwafS funding to consolidate and strengthen what has been initiated in the current project**. Indeed, it is complicated to envisage further integration of our research policies and associated resources without a long-term support. This **long-time support is even more fundamental at a time when our alliance is growing and working for the integration in the Beyond UNIVERSEH project of the new partners to the Alliance, namely the University of Tor Vergata (Rome 2, Italy) and the University of Namur (Belgium)**.

The Alliance has carefully considered the possibilities offered by the Commission through the current Horizon Europe call *European Excellence Initiative (EEI)*. It appears that this call would not allow a continuation of the financial support of our actions as such; since it implies funding focused on one of our partners or a new extension of our alliance, which is not envisaged at this time. It is essential for us to work on the consolidation of the actions initiated before considering a new opening of the partnership. Moreover, we underline the fact that through the recent Erasmus + call *European Universities*, we proposed to continue some of the actions identified in the UNIVERSEH project (researcher's mobility, implementation of citizen science actions, research funding, collaboration with the space industry...) but we are aware of the fact that this will unfortunately be insufficient to achieve an integrated approach in terms of research and innovation.

In the context of the renewal of funding for European universities in the field of education, it seems that **the issue of joint entities should be prioritised**. This is why the Alliance, and its Governing Board will pay close attention to the results of successful partnerships of the Erasmus + call for *joint European degree label and legal entities for European Universities*. Further, the Alliance if selected for the Erasmus + call *European University* will develop actions to build on a multi-year vision of UNIVERSEH as a future-proof integrated European higher education institution.

From a research point of view, we are in favour of setting up a **specific call for the experimentation of joint international and virtual laboratories for European universities**. This would allow for the mutualisation of human, financial and technological resources, but also for the initiation of large-scale research programmes on a European university level.

We are also in favour of an initiative allowing:

- **A recognition of the actors involved, particularly the researchers, in the implementation of European university projects to attract new talents.**
- **An allowance of trainees in master or doctorate to reinforce the mobility of students in the framework of research activities.**

## 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 Alliance's opinion on the tenure-track system is divided. It recognises the interest of this system in securing the careers of young researchers but questions its limits. Indeed, the system is implemented with quite a success in the United States, but also in Europe (Belgium, Luxembourg, Finland, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland ...). Still, it may not suffice to encouragingly foster early career. **The Alliance advocates for:**

- **Developing instruments to balance the gap between countries in the ratio of junior and senior faculty positions with offering permanent positions after a rather short time of time-limited contracts.**
  - **An attractive PhD to Post-Doc ratio and adequate full position salaries.** This may facilitate and balance the mobility of researchers within our alliance.
- 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?

Regarding the academic/researchers career assessment, the Alliance proposes that consideration be given to how to enhance the value of the investment of academic/researchers in European universities. For instance, a **European resume could be developed with sections on actions undertaken to promote or act in favour of European values** (Mobility: has the researcher carried out research activities outside their university? Multilingualism: has the researcher taught or conducted research in a language other than their mother tongue?) Further, the Alliance agrees with the European Commission on the **need to develop more qualitative indicators rather than quantitative indicators to evaluate research and institutions.**

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

The UNIVERSEH Alliance is rather reluctant to develop new e-infrastructure as **the landscape of digital platforms and applications is already extremely wide at national and local level.**

The Alliance would also like to stress that virtual mobilities or "internationalisation at home" programmes, although interesting complementary schemes to the physical mobility of research actors and collaboration between institutions, should not be the rule.

## 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?

To accelerate access to excellence in science, the Alliance promotes the **development of a research policy being an integral part of the global policy of excellence which may be specific to each European university.**

According to the Alliance, research should not be self-centred but should respond to and be connected to other priorities defined at the Alliance level. Thus, research policy would be linked to and respond to actions for excellence in education, internationalisation, innovation and impact on society, human resources, student life, outreach and citizen science.

The UNIVERSEH alliance has recently redefined its priorities in its updated mission statement and has defined priorities that are consistent with European aims and values:

- Higher education for all,
- Space and society,
- Space and economy,
- Space and life,
- Space for all,
- Space and sustainability,
- Space crew,
- UNIVERSEH as one entity.

In our next research roadmap and vision we will need to ensure that these priorities are addressed.

## 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?

As described in the previous point dedicated to excellence, it is fundamental for the Alliance that the research policy of the alliances be presented and perceived within an overall dynamic specific to each alliance. In this way, an integrated attractiveness policy can be developed based on the specificities of each alliance. In this respect, **it is essential that European universities benefit from a specific funding to build, develop and implement emblematic European research actions that will enable them to stand out at international level.** It seems therefore completely coherent that such an initiative should be geared towards European research priorities.

## 6. Other recommendations

The UNIVERSEH Alliance advocates for three types of actions to develop within the alliances:

- Intensify the "Go green policy" in each alliance,
- Allow different types and sizes of alliances,
- Organise regular European University forums to promote the exchange of good practices between Alliances and disseminate the results of the European Universities.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101035795

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

\*