

ERA POLICY BRIEF

CALL: H2020-IBA-SWAFS-SUPPORT-1-2020

TOPIC: IBA-SWAFS-SUPPORT-1-2020

PROJECT: TRANSFORMING R&I THROUGH EUROPE-WIDE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER
(YUFERING) <https://yufe.eu/yufering>



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 supports the emergence of “European Universities” by 2024 by funding alliances from across Europe. The ambitious mandate aims to develop systemic, structural and sustainable institutionalized cooperation between higher education institutions. Complementing 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. This is 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, several of which are relevant for universities. The feedback from the alliances will help to 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).

Glossary:

CERI – Community Engaged Research and Innovation

EC – European Commission

EU – European Union

EEI – European Excellence Initiative

EUA – European University Alliance

EUI – European University Initiative

DG – Directorate General

FKT – Flipped Knowledge Transfer

HE – Horizon Europe

HEI – Higher Education Institution

H2020 – Horizon 2020

R&I – Research and Innovation

SwafS – Science with and for Society

YUFE – Young Universities for the Future of Europe

FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS (MAX 1.5P)

1. Three main types of challenges have been encountered within YUFERING and these are analysed below:

a. Legal and Regulatory challenges and barriers

On a macro level, different jurisdictions are present, which could limit institutions from implementing the necessary changes. After understanding the national research career systems, policies and the institutional contexts of the YUFERING partners, it is clear that not all of them are at the same point, making it difficult to implement a common approach. Changes towards a more responsible R&I system generally happen at the national level (e.g. Research Evaluation, Recognition and Reward, Open Science Implementation), whereas individual institutions have no jurisdiction to fully implement agreements or improvements identified at the Alliance level.

At the organisational/Alliance level, a challenge in R&I cooperation concerns the different levels of experience, capacity and performance at various institutions. Another challenge encountered whenever a common practice or initiative is being developed (e.g. training, framework) is to account for the different national, local or institutional characteristics and developing initiatives that would nevertheless be beneficial for all institutions. The different experiences in terms of R&I lead to successful knowledge exchange and sharing of good practices among the partners, but the institutions are facing the challenging task of adapting these solutions to the institutional or local level.

b. Challenges and barriers originating from current (policy) frameworks and concepts

From the collaboration on R&I and the work in the transformation areas addressed in the YUFERING project, common challenges faced by the Alliance universities are: the different level of awareness or lack of prioritisation of **Community-Engaged Research and Innovation (CERI)**, the lack of resources and incentives across the university communities, and the uneven resources and institutional support for **CERI**, **Flipped Knowledge Transfer (FKT)** and **Open Science** practical implementation.

c. Financial Barriers and Challenges

One of the main challenges encountered by the YUFE Alliance is the lack of adequate levels of funding and funding continuity. The lack of sustainable funding and alignment of funding instruments, both at the European and the Member State levels, hinders the degree of synergistic and collaborative initiatives in R&I in relation to the institutional change areas pursued in this project. The nature of project funding, and thus the project structure and format itself, is beneficial for starting initiatives, but it is ill-equipped to serve as a long-term funding mechanism for running the European University Alliances in all their complex aspects, including R&I. In addition, YUFERING partners being at different levels of development in different areas, renders the undertaking of convergence towards common principles, policies and practices realistic only in the long-term, reinforcing the need for sustainable funding.

2. The YUFE Alliance has proactively tackled some of the most pressing challenges through the development of a holistic vision and strategy for YUFE in 2030 going beyond traditional missions of universities (education, research and innovation, service to society). Departing from the strategic priorities developed in YUFE 2030, YUFE partners will continue to apply for projects to ensure the sustainability of current work and actions. In terms of R&I, YUFE will seek to e.g. continue developing joint initiatives such as training programmes and common R&I projects to maintain the collaboration and knowledge exchange that has started taking place at the YUFE institutions.

Towards the various national and institutional contexts, the YUFE Alliance is adopting a custom-fit rather than a one-size-fits-all approach allowing partners to keep their identity in local contexts and to develop a true European University. To reach this stage, various activities across YUFE projects have contributed to building strong mutual trust and a solid foundation of the YUFE European University. The YUFE Alliance fosters the exchange of knowledge and sharing of tools and best practices among the 10 institutions involved. Within YUFERING and beyond, experts from all YUFE partners active in R&I transformation areas have successfully mapped existing strengths and weaknesses, and identification of specific characteristics at institutional level. In addition, a common profile of all support service professionals is being developed and co-creation and utilisation of joint research infrastructures is ongoing work.

Various feedback loops are also utilised to ensure the relevance and quality of the work carried out in this project. These allowed YUFERING members to check locally at each institution how a framework can be applied, aiming to upgrade what is currently available. Task leaders receive feedback on Work Package (WP)-level from the members involved, but also engage various groups from each institution, particularly those who will be directly affected by the intended changes. For example, mapping of career systems has been achieved by including the relevant experts at each institution, while for the development of the training programme for PhD supervisors, professional service staff members, as well as supervisors themselves, have been included in mapping the current practices. A member not directly involved in the development of the specific output is appointed as a reviewer. For strategic-level project outputs, the Advisory Board comprising Vice-Rectors of R&I and/or R&I competent experts from all ten institutions is engaged and asked for recommendations, as has been the case with the Competence Framework for Researchers.

3. Tangible progress and significant institutional change have already been achieved. An example whereby this is evident concerns a number of members of the YUFE Alliance institutions, which have strongly underlined the importance of the collaboration and integration of the knowledge exchange amongst the YUFE alliance members in their institutional strategic plans. For example, the Nicolaus Copernicus University outlines the value of the YUFE Alliance and has operational objectives on Open Science, CERI, Staff Development, and Sustainable Management, which will be met to a great degree through the action of the YUFERING project (for more information, please check the [Strategy 2021-2026](#)).

A number of key achievements reflecting tangible progress in YUFERING transformation modules are outlined below:

- **The YUFE model towards a community engagement-based research & innovation agenda**
 - o Report of YUFE community-engagement based research best practices
 - o Report of R&I support structures and mechanisms
 - o ‘Test bed’ meetings/workshops organized on community-engaged research
 - o The MSCA COFUND project of €14 mil. secured with all YUFERING partners
 - o HE WIDERA Twinning project of €1,5 mil. secured by 3 YUFERING partners with the potential utilisation of a specific EU research infrastructure
- **YUFE as a catalyst for flipped knowledge transfer and deployment in society**
 - o The YUFE Knowledge Transfer Expert Network and continuous meetings and exchange of knowledge between its members
 - o Launch of two case studies for the establishment process and growth trajectory of innovation ecosystems linked to YUFE partners
 - o Mapping of knowledge transfer practices of the ten YUFE universities, which will serve as the basis for elaborating the YUFE vision and transformation strategy towards flipped knowledge transfer
 - o HE WIDERA Excellence Hub project of €5 mil. secured by 2 YUFERING and other external partners
- **Transforming recognition, reward, and circulation of talents and teams across Europe**
 - o First draft of the Competence Framework for Researchers was presented to the YUFERING Advisory Board. Planning of development offers based on the framework
 - o Development of an assessment tool (“YUFERING impact portfolio”) and piloting it in nine recruitment processes for academic positions
- **Open Science (OS): establishing the New Normal**
 - o Self-assessment of the YUFE Open Science policies and researcher’s practices (Survey).
 - o YUFE Open Science calendar 2022, with a widespread dissemination and use by the wider R&I community, adapted and adopted at YUFE members and in other institutions world-wide
 - o Launch of the customized call of ‘FOS research teams’
 - o Identifying training activities and common strategies and syllabus for Open Science Training, aligned with DIOSI train-the-trainers and PhD candidates’ involvement.

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?*

A first step to facilitate the transnational collaboration between universities would be the creation of a legal entity of Alliances (work in progress in the YUFE project). In addition, the reliance on ad hoc project-funding is a structural challenge to inter-university cooperation in R&I, to the extent that it threatens the sustainability of the policies and training activities developed within projects such as YUFERING. Allocating resources to fund dedicated staff positions in the long-term would allow alliances to strengthen the sustainability of their R&I cooperation and ensure both sound management and continuity of core activities, equity among partners and coherence across parallel projects. Further, it would foster embedding of YUFE at all levels of institutions and substantially contribute to the already strong joint identity that the Alliance’s partners have achieved in a relatively short time.

A holistic and synergistic approach amongst the various Directorates-General (DGs), at the European Commission (EC) level, is indispensable to ensure coherence of vision and activities across the European University Alliances. This entails connecting different programmes, projects, activities and financial instruments, i.e., using a holistic approach including education, research and innovation to further develop and fully implement a European agenda on these topics. Moreover, member states and national policies (including national budgets) should be more involved in policymaking, and the EC should support the initiatives and ideas for R&I transformation set by the EUI Alliances, as well as dedicating the appropriate resources (funds and policy incentives) at EC level while strongly encouraging the national authorities to do the same. The EC should utilise, within this framework, the HE WIDERA instruments to help the universities from the EU13 countries participating in the European University Alliances to strengthen their capacities and resources so as to converge to the level of the other alliance participating institutions.

Regarding ‘Recommendation 4: Support embedded mobility in joint transnational educational programmes’, this is a priority for the YUFE Alliance, and touches on our mobility aims at the different stages: offering joint doctoral programmes, developing the planned YUFE Minors and YUFE Bachelors, and offering integrated training programmes within the YUFE Postdoc Programme. As for ‘Recommendation 5: Sustaining financial support for European Universities Alliances-EUAs’, this would be a top priority as it is necessary to have sufficient funding to carry out the planned activities and fulfil the vision of EUAs. The ‘Recommendation 8: Support the development of high-quality virtual collaborative learning’, ‘Recommendation 9: Support Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in developing interdisciplinary joint transnational education activities at all levels’, and the ‘Recommendation 10: Encourage HEIs to involve learners, academics and researchers more in the governance’ would also be priorities for YUFE.

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 YUFERING consortium does not have a strong opinion in favour of developing a model tenure-track system at the European level to support Early Career Researchers, given the substantial differences in the national systems and legal frameworks of the EU member states. As a first step, all partners of EUI Alliances which have their own tenure-track system at the national/university level, can communicate the standards (target group, prerequisites, content of evaluation agreements, way of measuring performance, etc.) transparently. Then, within and across the EUI Alliances, an exchange of ideas can take place about the standards and assess whether the Alliances can converge to common minimum standards. Integrating the agreed upon standards system within, for example, the EUI alliances as a pilot action could give researchers interesting new pathways for development in an increasingly barrier-free European academic environment. These new standards should, however, apart from research performance, be based on other domains such as education, leadership and impact and allow for diversified and vitalised career paths.

- *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?*

We are in urgent need of a cultural change with regards to academic assessment. We advise to also include other academic domains (and their diversity within) next to the research domain in the reform process as mentioned above (education, impact, leadership for example). For this, lessons can be learnt from the Dutch recognition and rewards programme. Furthermore, as mentioned above, we would broaden the term “researchers” to “academics” for all those who also perform activities other than research, as this more accurately describes the broad spectrum of activities and their importance in an academic career in the other domains. By approaching the academic career assessment, as ‘academic’ in an actual sense and not merely as a research assessment (i.e., including a broader set of assessment criteria rather than research only), with a clear shift from quantitative to more qualitative research assessment, would be a much needed shift.

All YUFERING members participate also in the YERUN network, and a position paper concerning the reform of the research assessment in Europe has been published ^[1] within the network. In this paper, YERUN provides the following recommendations that YUFERING endorses:

- Understanding what “research assessment” means for universities.
- Fostering the circulation of existing good practices, embracing diversity, and respecting autonomy.
- Distinguishing the discussion on the reform of research assessment from the discussion on precarity in research careers.
- Building a culture of qualitative assessment through adequate guidance, support and resources.
- Enabling constructive dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders.
- Ensuring that a “coalition of the willing” does not become a “coalition of the able”.
- Taking forward the initiative in the ERA Policy Agenda.

We would thus like to refer to this Position Paper as the YUFE Alliance’s views are fully aligned with the recommendations therein.

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?*

From the experience of the YUFE Alliance so far, the technical and political interoperability of digital (education and research) infrastructures is key. This is currently being piloted within our YUFE Virtual Campus. A synergistic approach between the European University Initiative and the Digital Europe Programme instruments would also accelerate the digital transition. EUAs require efficient and well-functioning virtual campuses. Our experience shows that it is difficult to build effective IT infrastructure with pilot projects/activities. In particular, there is a need for:

- Clear guidelines/roadmaps regarding the implementation of initiatives;
- Resources matching the number and level of ambition of initiatives;
- Big system solutions instead of design thinking approaches;
- Dedicated human resources for the functional management of the virtual campus and other IT solutions used by the alliances, as opposed to university employees doing it on top of their normal workload.

In light of the above, more support regarding shared IT infrastructure (including issues such as data protection agreements, FAIR data management and access to the virtual campus by third parties), would be particularly appreciated.

- *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](#)).*

Our recommendation would be to keep the number of different e-infrastructures to a minimum, and invest in support of institutions and collaborations of institutions building an integrated digital environment, as the YUFE Virtual Campus envisages.

Alliances must also be strengthened by supporting open access through a common strategy/approach to selected journals in databases that ensure open access to all members of the alliance and the R&I community as a whole.

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?*

The YUFE Alliance would be in favour of re-defining excellence in a more holistic manner (via the academic assessment reform) and with more emphasis on and recognition of societal impact. A European tenure-track model piloted in the EUI, as previously mentioned, could help attract and retain scientific talent in and for Europe. Also, the development of and cooperation in joint research infrastructures is important. Furthermore, we believe that capacity building across EU and towards other world partners should be further supported and acknowledged as a prerequisite to excellence promotion. This is in line with the YUFE Alliance's principle according to which excellence and inclusion need to go hand-in-hand to achieve true progress and impact. Another way to foster the access to excellence would be to setup clear EC incentives and coordinate the Erasmus+ and the other (especially Horizon Europe) instruments to foster the European University alliances' activities.

Research universities in the widening countries are still underrepresented and underappreciated. Their great potential is underrated, while it could be of great use to the alliances. They should be prioritised in terms of investment in means of institutional tools for supporting international R&I cooperation within stable and trusted Alliances.

It is important to support the development of expertise of science management staff. YUFE contributes to that with the YUFE Professional Service Staff Track that was launched in 2022 and provided a programme for HR personnel. For example in the YERUN network, there is a network of Research Services Officers. Those support schemes and networks should be further developed in order to foster an exchange of best practices in different areas (for example Open Science). The strategy for access to excellence should combine YUFE values - such as diversity, inclusion and openness, with high quality standards. Such high quality standards may be reached by tapping into the potential of alliance networks and by harnessing the power of quadruple helix interactions that will provide universities with access to a broader pool of experts with valuable knowledge from industry, academia and the wider society.

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?

Key elements would be: attention to increasing national and European research funding, valorisation and talent retention. The Excellence Initiative should partly be aligned with European missions and objectives (as is already largely the case in Horizon Europe applications).

We believe that the European Excellence Initiative (EEI) and the European Universities Initiative (EUI) could be further connected to maximise synergies and foster a successful implementation of innovative and promising Alliances. Given the lack of sustainable funding faced by the YUFE Alliance, a dedicated call for proposals for the continuation of the SwafS R&I projects of the EUAs as a temporary measure would be of great value and would provide a substantial step towards a more EU-oriented sustainable funding strategy and allow the EUAs to advance the joint initiatives and activities that they have built.

We believe that the European Excellence Initiative must be closely linked to the European Universities Initiative, in order to maximise all possible synergies and foster a successful implementation of innovative and promising Alliances. Excellence as understood in the strategy should not be synonymous with elitism, but be firmly grounded in notions of diversity and inclusivity. Contributing towards EU objectives such as the Green Deal or European Missions should be the cornerstone of such an initiative, in line with the Universities' mission to tackle grand societal challenges. The focus on Widening countries is welcome but the WIDERA EEI call for proposals should not be perceived as the natural continuation of the EUI SwafS R&I projects, but rather a key tool to support the widening partners to converge to the levels of the advanced partners. A dedicated call for proposals for the continuation of the SwafS R&I projects of EUAs should be considered and published in 2024. A lack of continuity in R&I funding for the European Universities would seriously endanger developments set forth under this H2020-SwafS call and the consolidation of all successful policies and activities. A misalignment between support for progress in

educational cooperation and developments and in R&I actions could endanger the overall success of European Universities.

Clear incentives along the proof-of-concept (prototype) -> project -> product (i.e., along the TRL chain) for the researchers, the research performing organisations and the European University alliances in particular, should be provided. This has to be synergistic among the HE (including the widening provisions) and the Erasmus+ programmes and, yes, it should definitively target the Green Deal, the Recovery and Resilience Fund goals, the digital development goals, the European Missions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general.

European research universities are still competing individually, when it comes to R&I. None of the universities, when they show their research potential and performance as a single actor, could stand the world competition as they are too small, have lack of dedicated funding and limited access to world class infrastructure and networking. But creating research networks based on the Alliances of the European Universities Initiative, could create a critical mass in terms of research potential.

Other recommendations

Our overall recommendation is to give greater attention – by means of increased, long-term financial support - to the EUI alliances that have developed workable models. In order to be effective, mapping among alliances practices, pilots and initiatives is necessary.



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