ERA **POLICY**BRIEF

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

This section reflects on the challenges the TORCH Project encountered during its first phase, with regards to R&I cooperation among universities, in relation to the envisioned institutional changes to be achieved through the selected transformational modules: **Common R&I Agenda & Action Plan**; **Cooperation with Non-Academic Actors**; **Open Science**; **Citizen Science & Public Engagement**.

A brief depiction on the **main challenges** per area is presented, along with some approaches and/or **good practices the Project adopted to tackle** them (challenges and experiences are shown grouped by topic). To conclude, a first preliminary note on both institutional and Alliance **progress in terms of introducing changes** as a result of the Project is laid out.

Challenges the Alliance faces in its joint effort towards building a common R&I framework are primarily derived from the diverse institutional organizational models and strategies, in combination with the distinctive local and national cultural, societal, political, and legal environments in which they operate. CHARM-EU understands and embraces this level playing field, and believes this context contributes to enrich collaboration and its outputs. These determinants apply, in a general sense, at each of the transformational areas.

In their development and adoption of the three **RRI CROSS CUTTING PRINCIPLES** (Inter- and Trans-disciplinarity, Gendered Innovation, Ethics and Integrity), the member institutions are at different stages. While there is a strong willingness to build on each of the principles, intrinsic factors (socioeconomic, cultural, legal, etc.) influence priorities in each university. Thus, benchmarking different structures and procedures can be challenging, as institutions do not start at the same level. To address this kind of challenge, sensitivity and open communication are key, so that the Alliance builds up on the basis of trust and collective benefit. Throughout the entire institutions' analysis stage of the Project, research tasks focused on finding best practices and points of connectivity, which set up a common ground for open collaboration and fostered mutual learning. This process was conducted under two principles: balancing the Alliance objectives and approach with respecting each partner's pathway; avoiding any kind of impression of quality assessment or ranking across institutions.

As a general rule, all transformational modules operated under the aforementioned methodological approach. The Alliance's various organizational models determined diverse points of departure, working paces and needs with regards to **COOPERATION WITH NON-ACADEMIC ACTORS**, **OPEN SCIENCE**, and **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**. Hence, some practical challenges emerged when undertaking their related tasks. In terms of best practices, the landscape analysis conducted, by sharing in-house policies and practices, helped the five partners learn and reflect on their own respective strengths, as well as ascertaining which partner(s) might help lead an acceleration away from possible weaker spots. For instance, an early clear definition of objectives and indicators regarding business-academia cooperation (entrepreneurship, spin-off, patents, etc.) allowed for a precise portrayal of the transfer and innovation systems within the Alliance. In relation to Open Science, current existing differences between partners concerning its implementation and tracking required several offices' input at different levels to define a common monitoring tool. Regarding Public Engagement, diverse interpretations on how it is positioned in the universities policies and structures also entailed a challenge in developing a standardized framework. The finest way to tackle these implies embracing diversity and opting for qualitative methods to collect and analyze information, that results in a nuanced understanding of the Alliance's universities dimensions.

Defining a five-institutions **COMMON R&I AGENDA** at a very early stage also poses a significant challenge, as shared research objectives and researchers' networks require time to be established in a sound manner. Moreover, R&I is perceived as a strategic and sensible matter by universities. It is essential, thus, to keep it highly free and competitive-based. Diverse research strategy plans (partners' interests and strengths) must be considered, and transdisciplinary intercultural research networks established in an organic way. In addition, individual researchers need to be supported to actively engage in such institutional process. Considering all the above, TORCH's approach on this matter could be highlighted as a best practice, summarized as follows:

- A flexible approach to accommodate each institution's culture, needs, and pace was undertaken.

- Combining a bottom-up methodology (participatory process involving researchers) and a top-down validation (institutional prioritization) eased the harmonization of research priorities. Furthermore, collaborative work among researchers prompted the creation of transdisciplinary networks within the Alliance.

- Any tasks carried out were meant to set up a stepping stone towards building a common science agenda, as well as to explore methodological paths that could facilitate its definition. Research objectives and researchers' teams established as a result of the process are part of an ongoing course of action and not a final closed product yet.

These challenges will extend further as the Alliance moves forward to considering future collective processes and structures. A strong guidance and commitment from the universities' leadership plays an essential role to develop an effective communication, regarding the Project's institutional weight, towards all actors involved.

At the moment this policy brief is drafted, the TORCH Project has completed its analysis phase, which comprises a number of Work Packages primarily focused on the Alliance landscape and gap analysis with regards to the selected transformational modules, as well as to plant the seed of a common R&I transformative agenda (that will be aligned and coexist with each member's individual R&I strategies). The results of these will feed TORCH's second phase, when a series of common policies and strategies will be developed to shape the Alliance R&I dimension and provide structure for the common science agenda. This opening mutual-learning exercise paves the way towards one of the Project priorities: **building mutual trust to enhance an inter-institutional cooperative way that accelerates and catalyzes processes of institutional change**. The inclusive and collaborative nature of the tasks carried out already enhances transformation within the five institutions, via two main channels:

- Processes, rules and regulations currently under development in each of the universities benefit from the Project's tasks and outputs. Partners benefit from the exchange of ongoing practices and strategies with a pioneering institution in a certain area. As a consequence, a multi-dimensional roadmap to accelerate best practices within the universities is set up, ultimately leading to novel institutional research strategies, policies and plans.

- Universities' leadership and a number of strategic offices are involved in the process (i.e. vice rectorates for Research, International Affairs, Equality, or Innovation; research strategy offices; universities' TTOs; public engagement, citizen science and dissemination units; Open Science, research data units, and librarians; research ethics offices; human resources; etc.). Such a comprehensive landscape and gap analysis promotes a self-appraisal process at the institutions' highest levels, as well as a more synergistic reflection, which both will reflect on future policies and strategies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Universities initiative is one of the flagship EC strategies for universities, and aims to trigger systemic, structural and sustainable institutionalized cooperation between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As a complement to the Erasmus+ action to support higher education models, the H2020 support is focused on contributing to the R&I dimension of the Alliances. The ERA Policy Agenda sets out several actions which are relevant for universities (i.e. action 1: sharing of data; a3: reform of research management; a4: strengthening careers; a5: gender equality; a7: knowledge valorization; a8: research infrastructures; a13: empowering universities; a14: engaging citizens; a15: role in R&I ecosystem; a17: research management capacity). The feedback provided here, along with the other Alliances', will help co-shape the design and implementation of the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024.

In this section, TORCH outlines a first set of recommendations in relation to some policy topics (PT) proposed by the EC, namely: Facilitating Transnational Cooperation (PT1); Strengthening Careers (PT2); Digital Transition (PT3); Access to Excellence (PT4); Increasing Global Competitiveness (PT5); Other Recommendations. The whole range of prospective topics would be of interest for the CHARM-EU Alliance, as all of them are interconnected and require developing further a holistic strategy for the European Universities initiative. Notwithstanding that, and following EC guidelines, this document focuses on those that better fit TORCH aims, considering their tight links to the transformational modules the Project adopted in its proposal and the tasks carried out during its first phase:

- Common R&I Agenda & Action Plan;

- Cooperation with Non-Academic Actors;

- Open Science;

- Citizen Science & Public Engagement.

The selected policy topics are as follows:

- **PT1: Facilitating Transnational Cooperation.** Which action should be prioritized to address the challenges encountered as an Alliance in sharing capacities, infrastructures, resources or staff in R&I?

- **PT4: Access to Excellence.** 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?

- **PT5: Increasing Global Competitiveness.** A European Excellence Initiative will be established to improve global competitiveness of Europe's universities, in synergy with the European Universities Initiative of Erasmus+. What would be key elements of such an Initiative? Secondly, do we envisage that such an initiative specifically targets EU objectives such as the Green Deal or European Missions?

The set of recommendations laid out below applies to all three selected policy topics, as it intends to be comprehensive and avoid reiteration. Likewise, they connect to other policy topics which were indirectly addressed through the Project (for instance, 'Strengthening Careers' is not included within the above selected PTs, as it was not chosen as one of the transformational modules in the Project's proposal. However, it is considered a crucial transversal issue, as detailed in Recommendation 2 below). In TORCH's view, further progress in the topics addressed below through the set of recommendations will boost transnational cooperation among universities, which will help accelerate access to excellence, which will, as a consequence, increase global competitiveness of the European higher education environment.

Recommendation 1 | Societal-Challenge-Driven Research & Citizen Science

The EU and member states should work towards implementing European and national frameworks that foster inter- and trans-disciplinarity in R&I, in order to facilitate Alliances goal of addressing societal challenges through a SDG-, EU Missions-, Green Deal-driven approach is met. Such frameworks would consider support to more international R&I cooperation, as many societal challenges are global challenges.

For that purpose, it would be crucial to support interaction with cities (particularly in the context of the move to climate neutral cities) and regional innovation (as part of a national and regional joined up R&I societal ecosystem). In the same way, the strategy should include support for enhancing the strategic capacity of Research Performing Organizations (RPO), including Higher Education Institutions (HEI), to uphold all stages of the research lifecycle to ensure design, implementation and impact for society. Support funding, such as that through Erasmus+ BIPs but for R&I, linked to sharing ideas and accessing infrastructure could also be explored.

In addition, it would be essential to acknowledge that an important aspect of knowledge valorization is research informed education as an impact pathway. In particular, working towards supporting more interdisciplinary research projects linked to societal challenges which have a focus on doctoral training as a point of synergy between education and research and where the project leads come from a variety of career stages.

More diverse voices should be included, as it would be essential to focus on increasing diversity in research excellence in terms of gender and underprivileged groups. In that context, the outcome from the conference on the future of Europe needs to be taken into consideration, in order to understand societal concerns and to provide opportunities for the research and education community to respond to them. The same way having a Gender Equality Plan is an eligibility criterion for HEIs and RPOs to participate in Horizon Europe programmes, steps towards explicitly considering underrepresented groups' inclusion as criterion should be taken (LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and socially disadvantaged populations).

Finally, citizens should be empowered and involved in R&I activities by developing a framework that stimulates co-creation transdisciplinary processes.

Recommendation 2 | Strengthening Careers & Researcher Career Assessment Reform

There is a need to revisit current academic performance evaluation models. The move to a more qualitative approach to research assessment reform will both promote and support behavioral change at institution/researcher/funder level. While 'Strengthening Careers' (PT2) is not included within the above selected PTs, it is considered a key transversal issue to be addressed within the second-half of the Project, as RRI Cross Cutting Principles, Cooperation with Non-Academic Actors, Open Science Practices, and Citizen Science and Public Engagement will be essential building blocks in this process. Support to continue this stepping stone process and to help accelerate others to make changes will be needed. Research career development is one component of an academic's career development. A synergistic approach needs to be taken, which places equal value on education and research, recognizing the value each has for the other.

It is important that evaluation models fit with a wide range and diverse talents of researchers/scientists, as well as with the need to strengthen the link between research and society in order to open universities up to the public, becoming truly trans-disciplinary, and enhance the societal impact of academic research and education, within a wider Open Science movement. This includes the need to further clarify and balance the specific weight of criteria in recruitments, selection procedures for permanent appointments, and promotion systems, for example in considering the balance between professional and managerial, education and research, and societal impact.

In order to enable a diversification of academic careers, research assessment should increase the inclusion of RRI elements, that would help widen access to research excellence (current common research evaluation, based on bibliometrics and grant successes, may create additional barriers to underprivileged groups). Similarly, Open Science, innovation and tech transfer practices should be given consideration, by setting up

incentives and support policies. A continuous and constructive monitoring system of academic performance assessment should be developed, making plenty of room for iterative reflections at individual, teams, university, societal, and systemic levels.

Recommendation 3 | Long-Term Competitive Funding & Digital Infrastructure

The EU should work towards ensuring long-term funding programmes for institutional cooperation in R&I activities. A holistic approach would be needed, so that synergies between different funding streams are found (considering universities' three missions), and no compartmentalized/sperate financing is set up for teaching, research, and innovation and transfer activities.

This would also positively impact the establishment of long-term sustainable researchers' networks within the European Alliances. In any case this could imply lowering the bar with regards to research projects funding. Highest research quality standards and excellence would be supported through a competitive funding process which is internationally peer reviewed.

Digital infrastructure is needed to support a coherent transnational cooperation so that students and staff can indeed move seamlessly across borders and institutions, ensuring that inclusiveness needs are known and can be met (within a GDPR context). Research infrastructure access at the large scale can be supported through Horizon programmes, but smaller scale level infrastructure can very much support the implementation of a common R&I agenda and may be digital or otherwise in nature.

Recommendation 4 | University Alliances Legal Entity

In order to develop an all-embracing strategy, a legal statute for European University Alliances needs to be explored. Alliances face administrative and regulatory barriers, both at national and European level, that hinder integrated cooperation in their missions and across borders. If accomplished, a single legal statute (its most appropriate format to meet the purpose still to be defined), would stablish a framework that would contribute to: ensure long-term collaboration and governance; ensure sustainability; joint applications to European calls; ease sharing and hiring staff; ease staff mobility; ease sharing infrastructures; gain more global visibility through a unique identity/image; have unified processes; facilitate the integration of different types of partners. All these would reflect on improving joint research activity.

A reflection on whether such a legal statue may require changes to European call eligibility is likely to be needed (e.g. at present, where three beneficiaries are required, might be amended to also allow for an Alliance as a single entity with no other partners to apply).

Recommendation 5 | Member States & University Alliances Cooperation

Members states play a pivotal role in the development of the European Alliances initiative. A continuous interaction between them (and within them across research and educational departments) must be ensured. Likewise, fostering interaction among member states and HEIs would smooth the path towards dismantling obstacles at national/regional levels, and thus facilitate transnational cooperation in R&I and education.

Along similar lines, interaction and exchange among University Alliances, in the frame of the FOREU1 and FOREU2 groups, should be encouraged.