

Action 13: HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS – Empowering higher education institutions to develop in line with the ERA, and in synergy with the European Education Area

Contact point: Stijn DELAURE (RTD.A3), Dario CAPEZZUTO (RTD.A3)

1. Description

BACKGROUND

Action 13 will contribute to implementing the Council Conclusions on Deepening the European Research Area (28 May 2021), and follows the Council Conclusions on a European strategy for universities (6 April 2022), which lays out following objectives:

- Strengthening the European dimension in higher education, research and innovation as well as synergies between them;
- Driving Europe’s global role and leadership;
- Bolstering Europe’s recovery and response to the digital and green transitions;
- Deepening the European sense of belonging based on common values.

In particular, we need to ensure that Europe’s higher education institutions remain competitive on a worldwide scene. Therefore, action 13 intends to strengthen investigator-driven research to reinforce Europe’s leadership in science and address the long-term trend of Europe’s decreasing share of research-intensive universities at global scale, notably after Brexit.

OBJECTIVES

Action 13 will counter these challenges by (i) **supporting more inclusive and deeper cooperation** between higher education institutions across Europe to accelerate institutional reform, and by (ii) better **aligning Member States’ efforts to strengthen global competitiveness** of their higher education sector.

The specific objectives of action 13 are to: raise EXCELLENCE in science and value creation of Europe’s higher education sector through cooperation; increase the sector’s global and visibility; contribute to empowering higher education institutions in Europe as key actors of change in the twin green and DIGITAL transitions; implement the comprehensive framework for attractive research CAREERS within and beyond academia; overall, contribute to implement ERA actions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16 in and by Europe’s higher education institutions, supporting them to play a leading role in the ongoing transitions of science and economy.

ACTIVITIES

To pursue these objectives in synergy with higher education policies, an umbrella **European Excellence Initiative** will be setup, consisting of a combination of policy measures and programme activities. The definition of ‘excellence’ in this respect will consider the developments on reform of research assessment (see ERA action 3).

- In pursuit of objective (i), support under the European Excellence

	<p>Initiative will focus on strengthening cooperation for excellence, supporting inclusive alliances of higher education institutions, such as, but also going beyond, European Universities alliances (<i>a distinction between alliances of higher education institutions and alliances of European Universities is made, similar as in the Council Conclusions of 6 April 2022</i>).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ First analyses of the R&I dimension of the European Universities Initiative suggest that higher education institutions from different capacities benefit in alliances of European Universities and institutional changes are accelerated. This indicates that the cooperation model of higher education institutions can be further explored to increase attractiveness and access to excellence. ○ The most successful models for collaboration in alliances in the various areas of R&I institutional change need to be collected and presented to other higher education institutions. Challenges are for instance the lack of a shared understanding on the digital needs, and lack of coordination of digital tools and platforms. There is a need to ensure interoperability of systems, similar to the federated e-infrastructure for research data (action 1). <p>- In pursuit of objective (ii), towards the longer term in getting to global competitiveness, we propose to co-create a sustainable support mechanism for alliances of higher education institutions that enables the pooling of EU and national funding, such as through a co-funded partnership.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We aim for a mechanism that is highly competitive and provides for the same label of quality and international visibility for alliances of higher education institutions, as the European Research Council's Synergy Grants did for interdisciplinary teams of world class researchers. ○ Crucial characteristics of the longer term support could be: scale, visibility and competitiveness of Europe's higher education sector, respecting institutional autonomy. ○ At the same time, the initiative could pursue following key features (see also section 8 with 'additional information'): inclusive cooperation, attractive careers, digitisation and open science, green transition, knowledge valorisation, partnerships beyond Europe. <p><u>At policy level</u>, following activities are proposed to be established under the European Excellence Initiative umbrella:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Studies to (a) <i>map and model excellence initiatives</i> established in EU Member States and beyond, (b) <i>assess the impact</i> of the current Horizon 2020 support to the European Universities Initiative on the individual institutions and on the alliance. 2. Policy support for Member States to setup excellence initiatives at national level in support of higher education institutions, through (a) <i>mutual learning exercises</i> on the basis of models, and (b) a potential peer-review mechanism at EU level to support the
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	<p>realisation of excellence initiatives at national level.</p> <p>3. Task Force with experts from interested Member States and with representatives from higher education sector to <i>explore sustainable and joint support mechanism for alliances</i> of higher education institutions under the next Multi-Financial Framework.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The task force will explore the needs and challenges for pooling of resources from various EU programmes (such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe) and from national and regional level, such as through a co-funded partnership approach (or other ways under the R&I acquis). ○ Based on the analysis of the task force, a pilot to test such mechanism can be co-designed. <p>4. Connected Universities consultation platform with experts from higher education sector to create a shared understanding on the relevant definitions, analyse challenges and <i>specific needs</i> of universities on the digital landscape in Europe, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ R&I data storage and management (beyond what is covered by action 1 and in synergy with digital education needs), ○ distributed and interoperable e-infrastructures (connected to action 8 and compatible with EOSC in action 1), ○ digital transition in regions of lower R&I intensity (relevant to action 16). <p>Following this analysis, the consultation platform will conceptualise a future ‘Connected Universities Initiative’.</p> <p>The task force and the consultation platform will report back to the ERA Forum.</p> <p><u>At programme level</u>, through Horizon Europe Widening participation and strengthening the ERA part, following activities are proposed:</p> <p><i>2022-2024</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Mutual learning exercise</i> for Member States under the Policy Support Facility on excellence initiatives. - <i>‘European Excellence Initiative’ action under widening participation</i>, to raise excellence through integrated and inclusive networks of higher education institutions, open to European Universities alliances and other alliances in variable geometries and with partners outside Europe. - <i>‘Acceleration Services’ under the strengthening the ERA part</i>, to coach higher education institutions with the research and innovation reforms they want to make progress in, open to all universities across the European Research Area. <p><i>2025-2027</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Pilot, testing the pooling of resources</i> from various EU and national level funding programmes in support of alliances of higher education institutions, notably with Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, and national funding.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activity <i>testing the Connected Universities Initiative</i>, or activity in support of new e-infrastructures or digital platforms to facilitate cooperation between higher education institutions. <p><i>Next MFF</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The results of the pilot tested in 2025-2027 will feed the development of new joint support mechanisms for higher education institutions.
<p>2. Actors (<i>role of MS underlined</i>)</p>	<p>The target group of this action is Europe’s higher education sector in general, and the existing and new European Universities alliances in particular. For all activities, strong engagement of and co-creation with the higher education sector is required.</p> <p>The action will be implemented by the European Commission, the stakeholders and the Member States together, and involve Horizon Europe Associated Countries where relevant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1. Studies: European Commission through public procurement; including <u>surveys, interviews, and workshops</u> with national government experts, national or regional funding organisations, European Universities alliances, higher education sector umbrella organisations. - 2. Policy support for Member States to setup excellence initiatives at national level: European Commission coordinated policy support for <u>interested Member States</u>, with national experts of existing excellence initiatives. - 3. Task force with experts to explore sustainable and joint support mechanism for alliances in R&I, in synergy with higher education: <u>experts assigned by the ERA Forum</u>, by higher stakeholder umbrella organisations, and representatives of the FOREU1 and FOREU2 platforms of European Universities alliances, together with higher education policy experts from DG EAC and DG RTD. - 4. Connected Universities consultation group to create a shared understanding on the definitions and specific needs, and to develop a Connected Universities Initiative concept: digital experts from higher education institutions. - Programme level actions in support of higher education institutions: 2022-2024, European Commission and Horizon Europe WIDERA programme committee; post-2024, pilot mechanism to <u>jointly support alliances of higher education institutions</u> (such as through a co-funded partnership).
<p>3. Timing and milestones</p>	<p>Q2-Q4 2022</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Study on the mapping and modelling of national excellence initiatives, for policy support - Study on Assessment of Horizon 2020 complementary support to the European Universities Initiative - Introduce support instruments in Horizon Europe WIDERA 2023-

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	<p>2024 work programme (acceleration services and excellence initiative), including aspects on strengthening careers</p> <p>Q3/Q4 2022</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present roadmap to co-design the new instruments, indicating key milestones and experts involved - Setup task force with experts to explore sustainable and joint support mechanism for alliances of higher education institutions, co-chaired by DG EAC and DG RTD - Setup consultation platform with higher education sector experts on digital transition <p>Q1-Q3 2023</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start of policy support for Member States to setup excellence initiatives at national level through mutual learning exercises through the PSF. <p>Q4 2023</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Task force delivers outcome on sustainable support mechanism for alliances of higher education institutions - Consultation platform on digital transition presents outcome with needs and recommendations towards Connected Universities <p>Q1-Q2 2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Estimated start of projects under WIDERA excellence initiatives <p>2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-design of a pilot for the sustainable support mechanism under WIDERA 2025-2026 and where feasible with Erasmus+ - Co-design of policy and programme actions to realise the Connected Universities concept post-2024
<p>4. Funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1. Analyses and studies: European Commission through public procurement under Horizon Europe WIDERA-2021-2022. - 2. Policy support for Member States to setup excellence initiatives at national level: European Commission through PSF and Horizon Europe WIDERA. - 3. Task force with experts to explore sustainable and joint support mechanism for alliances in R&I: supported by European Commission, through Horizon Europe WIDERA studies. - 4. Connected Universities consultation platform: supported by European Commission, through Horizon Europe WIDERA studies. - Piloting the <u>joint support mechanism post-2024</u>: European Commission through Horizon Europe WIDERA (and where feasible Erasmus+), together <u>with interested Member States</u>. - Other programme level actions in support of higher education institutions (acceleration services and excellence initiative): European Commission through Horizon Europe WIDERA.
<p>5. Expected impact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In general, successful institutional reform and upgrade of higher education institutions in the R&I dimension (empowerment to be

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	<p>actors of change), through integrated collaboration between institutions and with other actors in local ecosystems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared understanding across the academic sector on the digital needs and challenges ahead. Recommendations to a future Connected Universities initiative (e.g. under the next ERA Policy Agenda). Overall, accelerated digital transition of higher education sector across the entire ERA. - Contribution to modernised research careers in higher education sector, interoperable with other sectors. - Mainstreamed culture of excellence in science and value creation amongst higher education institutions, and particularly in laggard countries and institutions. - Accelerated institutional reform in R&I dimension and strengthened R&I capacities in higher education institutions through integrated cooperation. - The development of a highly competitive, co-programmed, sustainable support mechanism for alliances of higher education institutions. - Thereby, realising increased global competitiveness, visibility, and attractiveness of Europe’s higher education sector in general, and of alliances of higher education institutions in particular.
<p>6. Monitoring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of shared understanding as well as solutions to accelerate the digital transition, e.g. presence of a knowledge act for higher education sector (action 2), design study for possible pan-European e-infrastructures. Availability of a plan to develop a Connected Universities initiative in the next ERA policy agenda. - Assessment of implementation of the research careers models (pilot). Availability of Framework for attractive academic careers (action 4). Participation of alliances of higher education institutions in the implementation of action 4. - Monitoring progress in institutional change in the R&I dimension (preparatory work for methodology being finalised), as specific dashboard in the ERA monitoring mechanism (alternatively, as part of the higher education sector observatory announced in the European strategy for universities, covering education, research, innovation aspects) - Establishment of a pilot towards the sustainable support mechanism for alliances of higher education institutions, enabling pooling of resources, with involvement of Member States. - Participation of individual institutions and alliances of higher education institutions, in variable geometries to the European Excellence Initiative. Cooperation with top class institutions outside EU. Raised profiles of Europe’s universities in global university rankings.
<p>7. Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness creation via European R&I Days, workshops with university associations’ experts and with European Universities alliances. - Conference to launch European Excellence Initiative, European

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	R&I Days, Horizon Europe NCPs and information days.
<p>8. Additional information</p>	<p>The European Excellence Initiative umbrella is proposed to pursue following key features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inclusive cooperation: support for integrated and geographically inclusive cooperation as exemplified by the European Universities alliances pilot projects; first analyses indicate that higher education institutions from different capacities benefit and institutional changes towards increased attractiveness and access to excellence are accelerated (connected to action 16). - Attractive careers: support for flexible and attractive careers, rewarded on the basis of valuing teaching, research, entrepreneurship, management and leadership activities will be piloted with alliances of higher education institutions, following the European framework for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education (connected to actions 3, 4 and 5). - Digitisation and open science: support for the transition to knowledge- and digitally-driven higher education institutions, further mainstreaming Open Science practicing. - Green transition: support for the crucial role of higher education institutions in the greening of our societies, incl. by opening up campuses to communities and bringing science closer to citizens. - Knowledge valorisation: support for closer cooperation with non-academic partners within local innovation ecosystems, in order to equip academic researchers and support staff with the right tools and skills for knowledge valorisation, entrepreneurship, access to finance (connected to actions 7 and 15). - Partnerships beyond Europe: support for long-term strategic partnerships with higher education institutions and other R&I actors in third countries and European neighbourhood countries.