Progress of University Alliance Projects
Projects funded under Horizon 2020
IBA-SwafS-Support-1-2020 Call - Pilot I

April 2023

Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis on the intermediate progress in the period of 2021 – 2022 of the 17 European University Alliances projects funded under the Horizon 2020 Science with and for Society IBA-SwafS-Support-1-2020 call - Support for the Research and Innovation Dimension of European Universities. This call aims to strengthen strategic research and innovation partnerships across higher education institutions in Europe and to link the European Research Area (ERA) and European Education Area (EEA) by supporting the modernisation of universities. The key objective of the call is to utilise the 'European Universities' as a testbed for exploring support for institutional transformation in their research and innovation dimension and implement seamless and effective content synergies between Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

This report supports the implementation of the ERA Policy Agenda Action 13 "Empower Higher Education Institutions to develop in line with the ERA and in synergy with the European Education Area" and directly contributes to gathering insights for the development of a European Excellence Initiative (EEI) by the European Commission. The analysis in this report is based on the policy briefs, periodic reports, project deliverables, and reviewer assessments related to the 17 European university alliances in the first reporting period, covering the first 18 months of their implemented action plans. The report addresses the challenges faced by the alliances with cooperation, identifies good practices and tangible progress made in implementing transformational changes, and proposes recommendations for the various transformation modules. The seven modules aim to: (1) develop a common research and innovation agenda; (2) strengthen human capital; (3) share research infrastructures; (4) engage non-academic actors; (5) mainstream Open Science; (6) engage citizens and society; and (7) explore joint university structures.

This report broadly assesses whether the inclusive and integrated cooperation approach of the alliances has thus far helped accelerate the institutional change of all alliance partners.

Each of the main section in the report deals with a specific transformational module and includes recommendations that have been noted by multiple alliances or logically follow from the identified challenges, good practices, and progress reported by the alliances themselves.

For the authors, the following general observations and conclusions can be drawn from the analysis:

• The selection and prioritisation of transformation modules varied across the alliances, leading to differences in scope and implementation in the first reporting period. in future, a more selective approach might contribute to a more accelerated and sustainable change, whereby alliances could select those transformation modules that focus on their own priorities, needs, and ambitions within their own regional and international ecosystems;

• The first reporting period focused mainly on building on previous Erasmus+ alliance activities and well-established trust between the partners, setting up the respective projects, and adjusting to COVID. The new strategic focus on research and innovation required that the partners 're-introduce' themselves to one another through knowledge building block exercises, such as resource and competence mapping, benchmarking, and analysis of these results;

• The progress of the projects with respect to Grant Agreement commitments for the selected transformational modules in the first reporting period has been satisfactory;

• Renewed efforts by university alliances and national/regional authorities are needed to resolve the difficulties which arise in pursuit of transnational cooperation. Diverse institutional organisational models and strategies, in combination with the distinctive local and national cultural, societal, political, and legal environments in which the alliances operate, present sometimes insurmountable challenges;

• The European Commission is asked to continue supporting the university alliances with a joint funding roadmap under Horizon Europe in synergy with Erasmus+ programmes. The current project-based approach, as opposed to a joint programmatic approach, means that ensuring long-term engagement and ownership across various groups at alliance institutions, without the prospect of follow-up funding, requires extra time and persuasive efforts to mobilise researchers;

• Involving more research managers and leaders employed at alliance institutions from the outset in project implementation should be a future consideration. The presence of a dedicated staff member, who has a full overview of an institution's research capacities and has the authority to make resource allocation decisions, needs to be involved from the outset in the implementation teams of the projects;

• Alliance institutions need to step more outside of their academic silos and ensure that they are well embedded in their own regional research and innovation ecosystems. Universities are strong regional actors in the context of Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) and it is somewhat surprising that no reference is made by the alliances to being involved or engaged with other regional non-academic actors in these activities