



D01.4 – BEST PRACTICES SHARING REPORT

Work package: 01 - **Management and Coordination**

Dissemination level: public

Arqus II - Arqus Erasmus + Work Plan 2022-2026

(Project number: 101089551)

Due date: June 2024

Submission date: October 2024

Authorship credit: WG01 members from partner universities of Arqus II.

Arqus European University Alliance. ©Sept 2024.

This work is openly licensed via CC BY NC SA

Table of contents

Global context	4
Divergent regulatory frameworks	4
Recommendations	5
Challenges arising from the Initiative itself	6
Recommendations	8
Internal challenges	9
Recommendations	10
Language and culture	10
Recommendations	11
Staff policies	11
Recommendations	12
Engagement at all levels	12
Recommendations	13
Alliance governance structures	13
Recommendation	13

Challenges faced by the European Universities Initiative in the light of the experience of the Arqus Alliance since 2019.

Recommendations to enhance the future of the initiative and reinforce its sustainability

The European Universities Initiative is an exciting ambitious initiative intended to drive systemic, structural and sustainable transformation of the European University system in line with the aims of the European Education Area, the European Higher Education Area, and the European Research Area. It is an innovative instrument with enormous potential to leverage deep, coordinated change across European Universities, to forge impactful reform, to strengthen European identity, to promote democratic values through the education of critically-aware engaged citizens, to make Europe more attractive globally, to reinforce research environments and frameworks through critical mass and stable cooperation, to drive deeper cooperation with and between our universities' local and regional eco-systems.

Since the launch of the first call in 2018, and especially since the first selection was announced in June 2019, selected alliances, initially 17 and today a total of 64 in number, have worked intensely at individual alliance level to fulfil their ambitious missions and goals, involving large numbers of staff and students in activities of many and diverse kinds, whilst ensuring critical self-reflection on the initiative itself. Collectively, the selected alliances have also worked together in informal networks soon to become a single structured Community of Practice, FOREU4All, to reflect on shared challenges, exchange best practice in resolving them, and to act as an advocacy group for the enhancement of the Initiative as a whole and to ensure its success and sustainability.

Arqus, as a first-generation alliance, has participated actively in this process, and has been especially open to sharing reflections and experience with other alliances, both from the same generation and from later calls. As is frequent in pioneering initiatives, the challenges faced by the European Universities Alliances are many and extremely diverse in nature. If left unaddressed, they run the risk of detracting from the ambitious long-term goals and reducing initial enthusiasm amongst the university community. The aim of this briefing paper is to collect and reflect on the various major challenges as experienced by the Arqus Alliance since 2019, but especially during the second funding period since 2022, and to propose possible solutions. No claim to exhaustivity is made.

The paper will address firstly challenges arising outside the Alliance itself, moving on secondly to challenges arising internally, within the Alliance or our universities.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

Arqus has had to face up to major challenges arising from the global context in which the Alliance was born: the Covid-19 pandemic struck as the Alliance was preparing its first Annual Conference, an essential community-building in-person event, and necessarily imposed major changes in the initial work plan, based to a large extent on in-person interaction. This challenge, which put the structures, ambition and enthusiasm of the team to the test, finally constituted a huge learning opportunity for our universities individually and collectively, especially regarding the extensive use of digital tools in all our missions, along with the need to have robust emergency response plans in place.

Other challenges met due to the global geopolitical context have been the rise of exclusionary nationalisms, the questioning of democracy, the questioning of science, the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing armed conflict in Europe, the war in Gaza currently threatening to spread to the entire region, fake news and disinformation, the economic impact of the pandemic and armed conflicts. These factors all make the promotion of university internationalization and collaborative initiatives more difficult, but also much more necessary, and Arqus has contributed where possible to promoting informed debate on all of them.

DIVERGENT REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Progress in joint alliance initiatives is often constrained by the divergent legislative and regulatory frameworks in which our individual universities operate. This affects joint activities at all levels, with widely varying degrees of institutional autonomy in matters such as: funding sources, autonomy to fund-raise, the right to own property, personnel and recruitment policies, salary structures and policies, promotion criteria and policies, freedom to design and set up degree programmes, structure of study cycles and programmes, tuition and other fees policies, student grants, access and admission policies, language policies, administrative structures and procedures, public procurement regulations, data protection, regulation of the use of digital tools...

This diversity of regulatory frameworks limits or even totally impedes certain kinds of joint activity for some or all of our member universities. It is important to underline that

an impediment for one member university constitutes a constraint for the entire Alliance.

In some of our regulatory contexts, the diversity arises not only at national level, but also derives from regional legislation where competence for higher education and research belongs fully or partly to regional authorities.

It is not only legislation related to universities and higher education which constrains the work of the Alliances, but also general legislation in areas such as public procurement, receiving, managing and granting subsidies in the public sector, or regulations relating to setting up legal entities. Particularly surprising and frustrating for the Arqus Alliance has been the diverse interpretation of GDPR in our nine countries, or divergent legislation on the use of licenced or commercial software.

It has been satisfying to see how the national authorities in some Member States have reacted to the collective requests of Alliances to reform national legislation. This has especially been the case in the issue of the accreditation and implementation of joint degree programmes. There is, however, also a risk of uncoordinated reform leading to further divergence as these legislative reforms come into being.

Of particular value for the advance of the Alliances' major goals have been the policy experimentation pilot projects on the European Degree (Label) and Legal Status for Alliances. Arqus has participated actively as coordinator of one of the six pilots on the European Degree, EDLab, and is convinced that the work carried out collectively by the six pilots and the four projects on legal entity will leverage progress in both policy areas at both national and European levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Close cooperation at national level between universities participating in Alliances to identify specific regulatory constraints, and to act as a single advocacy group with national authorities to request reforms.

Promotion of coordinated approaches to reform amongst Member States and other participating countries.

Specific attention as advocacy groups to the implementation of the European Degree, and to other elements of the Draft Council Recommendations included in the Higher Education Package published on 27th March 2024, at national level in all our countries.

In general, advocacy for full and coordinated implementation of existing tools and interministerial agreements, especially those of the Bologna Process (ECTS, Diploma Supplement, ECTS User's Guide, European Standards and Guidelines, European Approach to the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, portability of student grants, amongst others).

CHALLENGES ARISING FROM THE INITIATIVE ITSELF

The first pilot calls for the Alliances were made in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-20, and then in its successor programme Erasmus+ 2021-27. Arqus recognises the effort made by the European Commission, and in particular DG-EAC to permit the launch of these calls and to ensure funding for this hugely ambitious initiative. However, the form the funding has taken has been a challenge for Alliances since the beginning. The project approach which has necessarily been used for the initial phases of the Initiative has a number of drawbacks from both a practical/technical perspective and a conceptual/policy perspective.

Taking the practical aspect first, the project approach to funding imposes a series of complex bureaucratic procedures for short-term (2-, 3- and 4-years) periods. Alliance work plans are forced into a work package and deliverable structure which has little to do with their long-term perspectives and goals. Constant detailed reporting (often with little pre-warning of formats and content) requires huge amounts of staff time and dedication. Changes in ambitious and complex work plans must go through a complex amendment process, eliminating much of the flexibility required.

The lack of certainty regarding continuity of funding beyond the set period, together with the risk of funding gaps between funding periods is a serious constraint both for staff motivation, promotion and stability and for institutional buy-in. The risk of funding gaps is especially serious in their potential negative impact on staff contracts dependent on European funds.

From a conceptual perspective, the short-term funding and work package/deliverables approach leads to many actors understanding that this is just another European project based on a European consortium, thus hindering deep long-term institutional commitment.

The fact that the Initiative has been launched under the umbrella of the Erasmus+ programme has been of huge benefit for the educational aspects of Alliance activities, and has definitely proven to be a driver for deeper joint academic endeavour, such as joint programmes. However, as research universities, Arqus members have had difficulty ensuring and funding the research dimension of our collaborative effort, which is central to our institutional and Alliance missions. The SwafS call under Horizon 2020 went some way to leveraging the potential for stable research collaboration and avoiding the deepening of the divide between education and research which constitutes a hindrance to making the most of the unique potential universities have due to their combination of education, research, innovation, transfer and societal engagement missions and activities. Arqus is not requesting earmarked funding for its actual research, which should always be quality-based. Rather, the research dimension should be reinforced through funding to support the establishment of stable structures and frameworks to promote joint research with critical mass to address the major challenges Europe faces today, taking full advantage of the trust-based stable cooperation eco-system under consolidation within the Alliance.

An unexpected challenge in the early years of the Initiative has been the enormous pressure on the Alliances to act as testbeds not only within their own work plans, but also in general for a large number of higher education and research policy issues. In more recent years, as the first Alliances have become accustomed to these requests for input and evidence, we have been able to factor some of this effort into our work plans and organizational structures, allowing for more and better policy analysis. It is, however, still the case that this is a huge demand on Alliance structures, time and personnel, as has also been pointed out by several analysts in the sector. The constant request for policy input from Alliances also brings the risk of excluding those universities not participating in the EUI from part or much of the policy dialogue at national and European level.

Acting as a loose consortium of universities without legal entity, as is the case of the majority of Alliances, constrains several aspects of Alliances' day-to-day work, and adds to the risk of understanding them as short-term projects. Having legal entity can facilitate Alliances acting jointly to hire staff, buy shared goods and services, participate as a single entity in projects with external stakeholders, issue microcredentials, amongst other activities. The higher education package and blueprint for a European degree even

contemplates the possibility of institutional accreditation for Alliances as degree-awarding entities. A serious obstacle to moving forward in this direction is the absence of a fully-adapted or suitable legal figure which covers all the needs of Alliances of universities as academic institutions.

Internally, having legal entity would underline the long-term nature of the deep cooperation Alliances are endeavouring to consolidate. Similarly, it would help to differentiate between the role of the coordinator and that of the coordinating institution as a partner in the Alliance. This overlap, or dual role, often leads to confusion or even tension in governance and management structures, which could be avoided if the coordination role is adopted by a “neutral” legal entity.

Finally, with regard to the structure of the initiative, from the outset, Alliances have been concerned by the limited scope of the initiative, in particular regarding eligibility as associate partners. Successive calls have gradually extended the scope of both full partners (now including the Western Balkans) and associate partners (to all EHEA signatory countries). There has, however, been much debate around the global dimension of Alliance composition and activities, in the light of the global nature of the many challenges which universities are called upon to address in their education and research missions, and the need to educate forward-looking critically aware global citizens for our interdependent world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arqus strongly supports the current proposal for a single Investment Pathway which would permit long-term funding (understanding the maximum of 7 years imposed by the budget structure of the MFF). This should involve a single application for the period, with an overall work plan, broad and clear objectives and targets, with periodic reporting on progress, without the imposition of a structure narrowly based on work packages and deliverables. The work plan should cover all university missions if thus desired by the alliance concerned.

For the research dimension, cooperation for the doctoral cycle, short- and long-term mobility of junior and senior researchers including doctoral candidates and post-docs, joint research support structures, staff development for academics, administrative and technical professionals, structures for the sharing of research infrastructure, initiatives to ensure synergies between research and education, initiatives to promote Open and Citizen Science, to engage even more intensely with our local socio-economic

environment and facilitate collaboration amongst them, to name only a few examples, could be eligible for funding. All of these would further the goals of the European Research Area.

It is essential that the revised framework for the funding of Alliances should ensure that there is no funding gap between funding periods. This is especially important for those Alliances with earliest kick-off dates. Avoiding a funding gap is also essential in the 2-year renewal of funding foreseen for Alliances approved for funding in 2022 and 2023, whose eligibility period comes to an end before the commencement of the next MFF 2028-34.

Whilst the Alliances are excellent and willing testbeds for multiple aspects of higher education and research policy issues, it would be helpful if requests for input and evidence were planned with sufficient time in advance and with a coordinated calendar.

Alliances acting as advocacy groups at national level, together with FOREU4All at European level, should seek the necessary regulatory reform to design legal entities suitable for the higher education sector. This would be of considerable assistance to the coordinating universities, who have experienced the difficulties arising from their dual role as coordinator and as partner.

Arqus recommends a more open approach to the eligibility of associate partners, in particular with regard to their geographical origin, facilitating the global dimension which many Alliances have adopted and promoted. This would not only respond to the demands of the Alliances, but also help to promote the global attractiveness of the EUI and of the European Education Area.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

The divergent legal and regulatory frameworks which act as barriers for the activities of the Alliances exist not only at European, national and regional level. We have also detected internal institutional regulations and strategies which constrain Alliance activity. These cover administrative procedures, but also institutional strategies addressing issues such as internationalization, priorities in the use of mobility funds, digitalization, data protection, and many others.

A related challenge is that of anchoring strong institutional engagement at all levels. For the success of the Alliance, it is essential to count on the full support of top university

leadership. A particularly critical moment is that of changes in rectoral teams, often accompanied by new institutional strategies and priorities. If the Alliance is not fully embedded in overall long-term institutional strategies, partners may disengage fully or partly from activities, or even withdraw entirely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important that entire governing teams at partner universities are aware of the added value of belonging to the Alliance as an instrument for institutional enhancement, and that they promote gradual embedding of Alliance goals and activities in mid- and long-term institutional strategies and plans.

Alliances should attempt to promote a high degree of flexibility and intercultural awareness is necessary to tap into the full potential of the Alliance as a driver of institutional enhancement. Decades, even centuries of working in a purely regional or national environment often make it difficult for institutions or their personnel to envisage alternative approaches to their work.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

A key challenge for all international endeavour, even in relatively similar cultural contexts such as universities across Europe, is the considerable diversity of institutional administrative and academic cultures. This affects high-level decisions regarding issues such as financial management or academic protocol, but also low-level practices such as how to call and run meetings, the organization of the working day, or times of day when it is appropriate to expect staff to be available to attend meetings. All of these issues impact on the success of multilateral cooperation if awareness of difference and how to address it is not raised amongst participants.

Similarly, in many partner institutions foreign language proficiency cannot be taken for granted amongst academic and professional staff outside the International Office, or certain disciplines. The transversal nature of this Initiative is directly limited by the absence of language ability amongst highly qualified staff in certain areas of university

administration and academic activity. The issue of language proficiency is also an obstacle to student participation in many cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Programmes in intercultural awareness and competence at all levels are highly recommended for both staff and students.

Language competence should be facilitated by language courses of varying kinds and levels. Similarly, friendly and safe spaces for the use of foreign language in non-threatening circumstances should be promoted within Alliance activities to facilitate the activation of passive language competence amongst staff and students.

Alliances should also deploy a series of mechanisms to facilitate access to Alliance activities, materials and publications in a variety of languages.

STAFF POLICIES

The profile required of staff for Alliances is a complex combination of expertise, experience, knowledge, aptitudes and attitudes. The required combination is rare both inside our universities and on the open job market; as Alliances have become larger and more numerous the competition for the limited pool of experienced staff for high-level Alliance management has been more intense. A huge effort is also required in training and development for more junior, less experienced staff. All of this in a context where retaining staff is challenging due to a series of factors rendering posts less attractive: short-term contracts due to dependence on project-based funding, salaries restricted by public administration regulations and standards, lack of promotion opportunities as temporary project-dependent staff. A particularly strong challenge is related to attracting and retaining IT specialists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Alliance should develop, individually or collectively, training programmes for current and future staff, perhaps in the form of stackable microcredentials, and covering all aspects of Alliance management and support.

Alliances should seek bridging funding mechanisms for possible funding gaps between “projects”. Legal entity status is a particularly robust long-term mechanism for central Alliance staff, but may not solve the issue for local partner university staff.

Alliances should attempt to ensure attractive working conditions and, where possible, career promotion prospects beyond the timescale of current project funding.

ENGAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS

The European Universities Initiative is a complex pioneering initiative which proves difficult to explain to those not directly involved, requiring a huge effort of targeted communication at all levels. Engagement cannot be expected without some degree of understanding of the goals and added value of the Alliance.

A shared challenge across Alliances is that of ensuring student representation. Whilst it is relatively simple to establish governance models incorporating student representation and voting rights, it has proved much more difficult actually to engage students in the work of governing bodies, or even in that of their own Student Council. At the level of student participation in general in Arqus initiatives and activities, on the whole the response has been positive where there has been clear recognition of the effort invested: ECTS credit awarding, mobility grants, language support, etc., although the challenge of overall awareness amongst students often lacking language proficiency or awareness of structures, services and activities at the level of their own institution persists.

For staff participation, the challenge in many partner institutions is not necessarily one of the will or desire to participate, but the lack of clear recognition mechanisms or incentives. Promotion and evaluation structures are heavily based on research, with little recognition for international collaboration or innovation activities beyond those strictly related to the research mission. For professional staff, incentives are similarly restricted

to more traditional activity in most cases and recognition of work time, extra effort or dedication is constrained by institutional or national regulatory contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Alliances should, in coordination with their individual partner universities, develop incentive and recognition schemes for student representatives, student and staff participation in all Alliance activities. A variety of approaches should be embraced, sharing best practice from individual institutional culture.

Alliances should also act as advocates for changes in institutional, regional or national regulatory frameworks to promote parity of esteem across the different missions of universities in criteria for staff seeking promotion, salary incentives and the like.

ALLIANCE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Despite years of experience in multilateral networks and associations, it has proven challenging to consensually design robust governance structures transcending project approaches and timeline, due to differing national, academic and institutional cultures regarding governance structures and practices and of course to the novelty and ambition of the initiative. However, these structures are essential in order to ensure long-term commitment and perspectives, and thus the success of the initiative. A further challenge has been to keep them as simple as possible, but at the same time cover all the different levels and dimensions of Alliance activity.

RECOMMENDATION

Alliances should pay close attention to the consensual design and implementation of their governance structures and closely monitor their efficiency and effectiveness, effecting reform when proven necessary.

The Arqus European University Alliance is co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or EACEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.