D13.3 – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUTHORITIES ON ELIMINATION OF OBSTACLES

Work Package: 13 - **Arqus Talent & Innovation Fund**

Dissemination level: public

Arqus II - Arqus Erasmus + Work Plan 2022-2026

(Project number: 101089551)

arQus
European University Alliance

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUTHORITIES
ON THE ELIMINATION OF OBSTACLES

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Co-funded by
the European Union

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01. RATIONALE

1.1 Introduction (European Universities Initiative, Arqus European University Alliance, Arqus Joint Calls)

The Arqus European University Alliance was established in 2018 in response to the European Commission's "European Universities Initiative", in which seven renowned European universities joined forces to cooperate more closely in the areas of research, teaching, administration and social engagement and thus contribute to the excellence and attractiveness of European higher education. The Arqus European University Alliance was selected in June 2019 as one of the first university alliances to receive three years of funding under Erasmus+.

Between October 2019 and September 2022, the Alliance worked together on the following topics: Widening Access, Inclusion & Diversity; Student-Centred Frameworks for Quality Learning; Multilingual & Multicultural University; Entrepreneurial University & Regional Engagement; Research Support and Early Stage Researcher Development; and Engaged European Citizens.

In October 2022, the Arqus European University Alliance started its second funding period under the Erasmus+ programme which enables the Alliance to further develop the results from the pilot phase in the above-mentioned areas and to continue its strategic cooperation.

The Alliance is nowadays composed of the universities of Granada, Graz, Leipzig, Lyon 1, Maynooth, Minho, Padua, Vilnius and Wroclaw, which are dedicated to the strategic alignment of the Alliance and the pressing issues of our time: Climate Change & Sustainable Development, Artificial Intelligence & Digital Transformation, and European Identity & Cultural Heritage.

As part of this second Erasmus+ Work Plan 2022-2026, the working group "Arqus Talent & Innovation Fund" pursues the following objectives:

1. **Talent development** through the Arqus Talent Scholarship Fund, which is aimed at talented students who want to pursue complete postgraduate studies (Master's or Doctorate) at one of the Arqus partner universities including a compulsory mobility (study period, training, research stay) at a second Arqus partner university.

2. **Fostering innovation** and entrepreneurial thinking through the Arqus Innovation Fund, which aims to incentivize innovative bottom-up initiatives by Arqus staff and students by providing seed funding for innovative activities that go hand in hand with the objectives of the Arqus Alliance and the three major action lines "Education, Research & Innovation, and Social Engagement".

As part of these funding schemes, the Alliance successfully carried out its first joint calls in 2023 allowing for single joint procedures and selection processes with the aim to approve and recognise these joint procedures mutually at the partner universities. The development of these joint calls and the individual processes were then set out in a "Handbook on joint calls" as guidelines and advice for the preparation and publication of joint calls for the entire Alliance.

In the development and implementation process of these joint calls, the work package identified barriers to joint administrative processes which will be addressed in the following paragraphs by outlining recommendations to respective authorities on how these barriers could be eliminated and thus facilitate joint transnational calls.

1.2 Objectives

This document, *Recommendations for authorities* on elimination of obstacles, aims to provide authorities with an overview of administrative challenges that university alliances (may) face when developing and preparing joint calls for participation in jointly designed and fully integrated alliance activities and initiatives, and recommendations on how these could be addressed and eliminated.

The "authorities" addressed in this document represent persons and institutions with official responsibility and official legal authority to make decisions or order and implement legal regulations in a particular area, such as individual national and local governments, university management and administrations, and the European Union.

Administrative barriers can be found at different levels - institutional, national, Alliance and European level - and are identified in the individual recommendations.

02. Joint Administrative Processes for Joint Transnational Calls – Obstacles

OBSTACLE 01.
Different academic and research cultures and practices

01

When designing a joint call, differences in academic and research cultures and practices have to be considered. All partner universities should be aware of and respect fundamental academic values, including academic freedom and institutional autonomy of all participating institutions.

First and foremost, it is important to get an overview of the existing resources at the partner universities, as partners might have complementary national or federal grants with different timelines, conditions, guidelines and funding frameworks or even no co-funding at all. This can be an obstacle in the sense that universities may face different financial situations and, depending on whether a call benefits from additional funding or not, there may be double funding.

When examining university cultures, various hierarchical structures and approaches (top-down and bottom-up, for instance) can be observed. On that basis, it could be challenging to find a common ground in decision-making processes and joint procedures within alliances. At the same time, these processes and procedures need to be aligned with internal practices at partner universities. Cultural differences might also manifest in discussions, mindsets and workflows. The situation might be further complicated due to language barriers and necessary translations into the working language of the Alliance (see Obstacle 3 for more details on this).

Furthermore, cultural differences are not only visible at university management level but also at academic level. Usually, not all academic disciplines are necessarily represented at all partner universities. This makes it more difficult for the partners to participate in joint calls in the usual quality and manner. Furthermore, this can lead to conflicts or different needs, or make different methodologies and practices necessary, which have to be taken into account.

It can also be a challenge to cover all academic disciplines in a selection process, which can result in a different grading from university to university as there are different approaches and expectations.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. **At alliance level,** it would be recommended to map current practices and resources, as well as to identify common procedures (which are compatible with all partners) that could be adopted for future joint calls, clearly identifying the steps, contact persons, etc. at each partner institution.

It is therefore important to reach compromises in discussions and show understanding for each other. In this sense, it could be helpful to develop, offer and promote courses for intercultural competence. In addition, it should also be made possible that not all partners have to be involved in every call or process if they wish to opt out or are unable to do so due to missing resources. However, it should be emphasised that transparency is essential in this context in order to keep all partners informed.

2. Also **at alliance level** and more specifically in the context of joint calls, selection committees should be represented by one jury member and one alternate member per university from various suitable academic fields, and criteria should be defined jointly. On the basis of the jointly awarded points, a corresponding and transparent ranking list can be drawn up, whereby it is also recommended to provide accompanying comments for further explanation. Any conflicts in this regard can be overcome by being open towards other methods and building trust between partners.

OBSTACLE 02.
Different deadlines for administrative procedures

02

Different deadlines for administrative procedures and admission applications across multiple universities require careful coordination and planning. All partner universities have their own timelines and administrative procedures that must be respected.

Taking that into consideration, it is also very important that each institution knows the internal procedures to identify which deadlines, procedures and agreements cannot be changed due to governmental or other constraints, and which agreements can be adapted to maintain a standardised timetable between the partners.

By being flexible, adapting administrative procedures and adjusting their own calendar, the participating universities can effectively navigate the challenges of different deadlines for administrative procedures and admission applications while working together to achieve the best objectives of the joint call.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. At **alliance level**, it is important to collect information that allows for the establishment of a harmonised timetable. By identifying common deadlines that can be synchronised for all universities, as well as different deadlines specific to partner universities (including deadlines for the submission of joint applications, the fulfilment of administrative requirements or the decision on admission), a uniform timetable can be established, which is an important tool for the entire procedure.

2. At **institutional level** and **alliance level**, it would be important to be aware of the internal deadlines and recognise that different universities may have varying administrative processes and requirements. In this sense, it is important, whenever possible, to allow for flexibility in timelines in order to accommodate these differences while ensuring alignment with overall deadlines objectives.

3. At **institutional level** and **alliance level**, it would be useful for partner universities to be open to work towards standardising administrative processes and to pre-define an annual calendar for the publication of Arqus calls. This procedure will allow to publish stabilised and predictable information for the entire Arqus community, as well as for potential audience interested in joint calls.

OBSTACLE 03.
Language barriers and communication difficulties

03

Although English is often used as a lingua franca in international initiatives across Europe, the varying levels of proficiency in this language among potential participants adds an extra layer of complexity to collaborative processes. The lack of a common mother tongue is often a clear barrier for those trying to participate in joint calls and work with individuals and teams across borders. This linguistic diversity can hinder the exchange of ideas and information, leading to specific problems including but not limited to the following:

⊘ **Difficulties in accessing joint calls and understanding requirements:**
The terminology normally used in the context of joint calls can pose significant hurdles. Due to differences in language skills, participants may find it difficult to understand specific terms normally used in this context, which are often linked to European project terminology. This complexity goes beyond mere language barriers and affects access to joint calls (e.g. when searching for call opportunities on the Internet) as well as the clarity and precision required in interpreting requirements. In general, navigating legal and administrative aspects of joint calls can be daunting for participants with lower English proficiency.

⊘ **Challenges in document clarity:**
Producing documents that are clear and easy to understand, such as proposals or progress reports, becomes challenging and extremely time-consuming when contributors have varying levels of English proficiency and writing abilities in general. The lack of English skills of some individuals often has to be made up for by those who are more proficient, leading to an imbalance in workload and contribution levels.

✓ **Difficulties in team work settings:**
Teamwork challenges can arise when individuals struggle to communicate complex ideas effectively in English, both orally and in writing. This can hinder the formation of cohesive working groups, and may lead to uneven engagement and group dynamics issues. In virtual or remote work environments, varying levels of English proficiency can further complicate communication, leading to misunderstandings (often as a result from interference with participants' native languages) and missed subtleties. All of this may ultimately exclude those who may not feel confident expressing themselves in English, and promotes a lack of inclusivity in teamwork.

✓ **Difficulties in implementing feedback:** Participants may find it difficult to give or receive constructive feedback (after a monitoring session with the awarding body, for instance) due to language barriers, which can hinder the iterative improvement process common in collaborative projects.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. **At institutional and alliance level**, we encourage to take a proactive role in providing comprehensive language training and ongoing support for students and staff. The aim is to improve the language skills of participants in order to facilitate effective communication and collaboration in the context of European Universities in general and joint calls in particular. These language courses may be tailored to the specific needs of participants in Alliance-related activities, focusing on project terminology, communication skills, and techniques for proposal writing.

   Support can also be provided in other ways, for instance, by creating university-specific language service departments providing translation, proofreading and other forms of language assistance. Offering training sessions on the use of new technologies for linguistic purposes (AI, digital proofreading tools) could also be considered.

Best practice example:

There are universities that are already implementing measures in this direction - for example, the University of Granada (UGR) offers language courses for staff involved in the Arqus Alliance, as well as summer stays in English-speaking countries for administrative staff. This university also has a Language Services Unit involved in the translation and review of internal regulations, website content and other institutional materials.

2. We also recommend providing adequate support and guidance to students and teaching staff involved in joint calls, both **at institutional and alliance level.**
    This may include organising information sessions (preferably conducted in the local language) where a comprehensive understanding of the application process, evaluation criteria, and other administrative requirements is offered.
    By conducting these sessions in the local language, institutions can ensure that participants, especially those less fluent in English, can absorb the information effectively.

3. Another key strategy for effectively overcoming language barriers in international collaborative settings involves the development of comprehensive glossaries and termbases **at institutional and alliance level.**
    These resources provide a common ground for understanding project terminology and promote the use of a shared vocabulary among all participants.
    By investing in the creation of these resources, institutions can significantly enhance communication and a unified grasp of essential concepts, as well as improve the quality of the proposals written by alliance and university members.

Best practice example:

This initiative is already being taken a step further in the context of the Arqus Alliance, where a common database of key terms translated into all local languages of the Alliance is being created and maintained. Inclusive glossaries ensure that everyone, regardless of their native language, has access to a comprehensive reference resource that helps them navigate complex project-related content.

When creating and developing these resources, it is also important to provide training sessions and online tutorials to help university community members become familiar with the usage of these tools.

OBSTACLE 04.
Varying institutional priorities and expectations

04

Each Arqus university, with its unique history, culture, and strategic focus, has its own set of institutional priorities and expectations, priorities that guide their research, teaching, and community engagement activities. This diversity fosters a rich intellectual environment but also presents a challenge for issuing joint calls.

When it comes to joint calls, the expectation is that the topics addressed should align with each university's priorities and focus areas. However, given the diversity of the institutions, there is always a certain level of mismatch between the themes of the call and each university's strategic goals, research areas and academic disciplines, or, also, and broadly speaking, their respective institutional needs. This mismatch is often quite small, as the people in charge of designing joint calls at the Arqus Alliance maintain close contact with relevant university representatives, and the Alliance has implemented numerous processes to ensure their input is heard and priorities considered in new initiatives. However, and despite ongoing efforts, achieving a perfect alignment between joint calls and the specific objectives and institutional frameworks of all Arqus universities remains a persistent challenge.

This lack of adjustment has the potential to hinder the effectiveness of joint calls, as these may draw limited participation and collaboration from academics, researchers and students whose areas of expertise lie outside the proposed topics of the calls. In turn, this could ultimately undermine the intended goals of fostering broad engagement, cooperation and jointness within the Alliance.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. In order to overcome these obstacles, a more inclusive and considerate approach **at alliance level** is recommended for designing joint calls: identifying common ground and fostering collaborative development.

    First, identifying common ground involves a thorough analysis of member universities' strengths and interests through mapping exercises. This analysis should extend beyond each institution's primary focus, seeking potential intersections in interdisciplinary themes, emerging research fields, and areas ripe for further collaboration. To accommodate diverse interests, designing flexible calls is crucial. This might involve offering broader, multi-thematic calls, allowing sub-themes within a call, or giving universities leeway to propose their own research questions under the overarching theme.

    The second element, collaborative development, emphasises the importance of inclusive participation from each university in designing the calls at alliance level. Involving relevant representatives from all Arqus universities in the planning and evaluation of joint calls, and ensuring a balanced distribution of roles and responsibilities among them is of the utmost importance.

    Open communication throughout the process is also key, allowing universities to freely express their priorities and concerns in all stages of the design process. Finally, continuous evaluation and adaptation are vital for perfecting the calls' development cycle and ensuring the ongoing effectiveness of joint Arqus initiatives, ultimately solidifying the collaborative spirit that characterises the Arqus Alliance.

OBSTACLE 05.
Financial issues

05

Financial management within joint calls has turned out to be challenging in many aspects, including: centralised vs decentralised payments; applicable taxes and fees in some countries/institutions; local/institutional regulations; etc.

Financial rules vary significantly not only among partner universities but also depending on the target group (students, professional staff, academic staff) and on the funding source (Erasmus+, Arqus budget, local or national co-funding, etc). Moreover, people involved in Alliance activities are often not very familiar with internal financial procedures and many obstacles only emerge after the call has been published and, sometimes, only after participants and/or activities have been selected.

As a result, financial management risks placing a heavy burden on administrative staff involved in Alliance activities, as well as on final beneficiaries, who often complain about the length of procedures and the diverse treatment received by the different member institutions.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. Enabling Alliance centralised payment of scholarships and funds to students and staff at all alliance universities - adapting payment mechanisms and regulations at the alliance universities.

   A similar approach to this one could be taken **at institutional** and **alliance level**. If centralised payments of scholarships and/or funds to students and staff are not possible, it is recommended to start preparing the ground for change in local regulations.

   At regional and national level, regional and national authorities should enable universities to easily pay foreign partner institutions, companies and/or students and staff (with foreign bank accounts, etc.), without imposing additional administrative burdens on universities.

2. Enabling flexibility in the application of financial procedures for alliance activities. Various steps can be taken at institutional and alliance level to implement this recommendation, i.e.:

   ⊘ Map internal financial rules, procedures and current challenges with regards to the following payment options:
   1. scholarships for students;
   2. scholarships for academic/professional staff;
   3. lump-sum contributions to activities implemented within the Alliance by students/ staff (e.g., in the context of the Arqus Alliance, linked to the Innovation Fund);
   4. reimbursement of activities implemented within the Alliance by students and/or staff (e.g., student activities), etc.

✓ Discuss possible approaches with Finance Offices at each institution. Wherever possible, opt for lump-sum payment options. Agreements with external providers (e.g., for travel arrangements) can also be discussed.
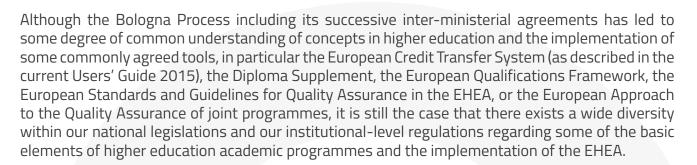
✓ Where necessary, lobby for change in local regulations to allow for further flexibility.

At regional and national level, Ministries of Higher Education and/or national/regional bodies responsible for Higher Education, etc. should allow for greater flexibility in the application of national rules and regulations. Moreover, Alliance scholarships and funding should be exempt from local/national taxation (similarly to what is done with Erasmus+ scholarships). Compatibility with other national and European sources of funding should also be clarified.

Best practice example:

Centralised management of Arqus Talent Scholarships by the University of Graz via the Mobility Online platform. The University of Graz centrally pays all Master's and PhD scholarships awarded within the Arqus Talent Scholarship Programme: this allows for standardisation of procedures, equal treatment for all scholarship holders, and overall process efficiency and effectiveness.

OBSTACLE 06.
Differences in education systems

06

Although the Bologna Process including its successive inter-ministerial agreements has led to some degree of common understanding of concepts in higher education and the implementation of some commonly agreed tools, in particular the European Credit Transfer System (as described in the current Users' Guide 2015), the Diploma Supplement, the European Qualifications Framework, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA, or the European Approach to the Quality Assurance of joint programmes, it is still the case that there exists a wide diversity within our national legislations and our institutional-level regulations regarding some of the basic elements of higher education academic programmes and the implementation of the EHEA.

There are currently several initiatives afoot at European level to remedy at least partially this situation, notably different moves towards the establishment of a "European Degree". However, whilst this is not yet a reality, it is necessary for alliances such as Arqus to adopt common practices, preferably based on existing EHEA tools, in order to overcome the difficulties encountered in joint selection processes. And furthermore to lobby for reform of institutional regulations, or regional and national legislation to eliminate obstacles to fully fruitful joint initiatives.

Students have long requested guarantees from their institutions that mobility periods would not only be fully recognised in credits without any additional bureaucratic burden and avoiding arbitrary decisions often by individual professors or departments, but also would not have a negative impact on their academic record, by applying standardised equivalences which do not correspond to the real performance. Grading cultures vary widely not only from country to country, but from discipline to discipline, from institution to institution and from department to department.

When cross-departmental, cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional selection processes take place it is of utmost importance to guarantee equity in the consideration of credits and grades obtained in specific academic contexts. This is not only the case of mobility programmes, but also of selection processes for admission to programmes, or scholarships such as those offered under the Arqus Talent Scholarship Fund.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. In particular, **at institutional** and **alliance level**, the immediate recommendation is firstly to map current practices in particular the following areas: number of ECTS credits composing degree programmes at different EQF levels, grading scales and recognition processes. This will ensure at least that working groups and selection committees fully understand the meaning of academic transcripts of records issued by different universities when applying selection criteria, on the one hand, and that working groups preparing calls are aware of the constraints existing at some institutions for full automatic recognition of credits obtained on official mobility programmes, on the other.

2. As a necessary second step, the recommendation is to draw up **alliance-level** agreements on joint processes, which would guarantee the following:

   - ✓ The publication and use of distribution tables for grades obtained, detailed at programme level as per the current (2015) ECTS Users' Guide, thus allowing for equitable comparison of academic records in recognition and selection processes.

   - ✓ The presence at selection committee meetings of at least one expert in comparison of systems, grading scales and application of distribution tables.

3. Further to this first stage, it is strongly recommended that at the appropriate level of decision-making **(institutional, regional or national)**, steps be taken to ensure the full implementation of EHEA agreements on:

   - ✓ Full and automatic recognition of credits obtained on mobility programmes, including short-term or innovative forms of mobility, blended and virtual mobility.

   - ✓ Full implementation of the Diploma Supplement as a transparency tool to help graduates communicate their educational trajectory and competences acquired, through formal, informal or non-formal learning.

✓ Removal of barriers to full recognition of prior, informal and non-formal learning (such as limitation of the number of credits which may be recognised).

✓ Flexibility regarding number of ECTS credits composing each EHEA cycle/EQF level for the design and implementation of European and international joint programmes.

Best practice example:

Full and automatic recognition of credits obtained on mobility programmes.

*The University of Granada's institutional regulations on international student mobility have guaranteed recognition of credits obtained on mobility programmes across the entire institution for many years, but since 2019, they have ensured that this recognition is **full and automatic** by implementing the following clauses:*

✓ *All credits included on all degree programmes may be recognised, whether they be compulsory, optional or fully elective, including final dissertations at EQF levels 6 and 7;*

✓ *It is the responsibility of the Faculty or School signing the Interinstitutional Agreement for mobility to ensure that full academic viability exists, with indication of which points in the student's learning path constitute valid mobility windows (which may be at any time in the programme);*

✓ *In order to ensure equitable treatment, recognition is carried out by the Faculty or School, as the body responsible for full degree programmes, with no intervention from individual Departments or professors. Appeals may be made to the Vice-Rectorate for Internationalisation;*

✓ *All mobilities are based on a Learning Agreement signed by the Dean or Deputy Dean of the Faculty or School. Procedures are in place to guarantee that each student leaving on a mobility programme has access to guidance with a trained academic tutor before the signing of the LA, and appeals procedures exist should this not be satisfactory or where unnecessary restrictions are imposed;*

✓ *Following a mobility programme, credits obtained by students and the corresponding grades, as certified by the host institution, are automatically incorporated into their academic records as per the LA, without any need for them to make a formal administrative request for recognition. Grades are converted in accordance with grade distribution tables where these are made available by the host institution. For the University of Granada they are publicly available for all EQF6 degree programmes, and are updated annually.*

Since 2023, these regulations also apply to all blended and virtual mobility carried out in official programmes, including short-term mobility, BIPs, COIL activities etc. In the case of BIPs, recognition of credits obtained is also applied to home students who take part in the remote learning activities and attend the face-to-face activities even when these are held at the University of Granada and thus do not involve physical mobility on their part.

Full text of Regulations →

OBSTACLE 07.
Lack of structures to facilitate connections between universities, researchers, research groups, who pursue similar research topics

07

Within the framework of the Arqus Innovation Fund calls, Working Group 13 (Arqus Talent & Innovation Fund) identified a lack of collaboration among partners in engaging with EU project calls. It was identified that this missing structure prevented the facilitation of links between universities, researchers, research groups, etc. pursuing similar research topics.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. Fully implement a dedicated support structure **at alliance level** to provide guidance and assistance to academics in developing and implementing joint project proposals.

2. **At the European level**, we recommend the development of European tools to encourage inter-Alliance cooperation.

In this context, the following more specific measures are proposed to address these issues and support partners from different universities in enhancing their participation. This includes the establishment of a dedicated support structure to offer guidance and assistance to universities in developing and executing joint calls.

- Assess the needs of researchers regarding their involvement in EU project calls.

- Disseminate and inform partners about upcoming calls.

- Provide training for researchers on how to navigate information on the calls' web pages.

- Offer training sessions for researchers on drafting project proposals.

- Develop a comprehensive database of skills from various research laboratories.

- Facilitate the sharing of information on research expertise among partners.

- Promote project ideas among potential partners.

- Identify and engage partners interested in participating in the project.

- Establish a monitoring committee to review project proposals before submission.

These measures aim to foster collaboration and enhance the effectiveness of engagement with EU project calls within the Arqus project framework.

OBSTACLE 08.
Data protection and compliance with the GDPR

08

The protection of personal data is of particular concern to each Arqus partner university, which is why all partner universities treat all processed personal data confidentially and in compliance with the statutory provisions. It is therefore challenging to align the different procedures at the individual universities of how personal data is processed and is allowed to be processed, including the different tools of communication that can be used across the institution and within the Alliance. Hence, internal data protection regulations at the participating universities may limit or even prevent the use of collaborative platforms.

For instance, the Arqus universities provide a good number of tools to facilitate communication within the internal teams as well as with students and external parties. For technical reasons and to ensure data protection, the universities may provide a different set of tools. Hence, tools that are not approved by the university's management often do not comply with the legal requirements as stipulated by the data protection, licensing and employment laws. It is often particularly problematic in terms of data protection that personal data can be collected in the background and passed on to third parties.

In legal terms, this means that it is not the respective university that is liable for the use of these alternative platforms, but the respective private individual who becomes the responsible data controller within the meaning of the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Such an individual may therefore be subject to a monetary fine under certain circumstances.

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. At **alliance level**, it is highly recommended that IT experts and Data Protection Officers are invited to work together on the development of necessary tools within the alliance, such as common communication tools, a common learning management system, a common online application platform for joint calls or a virtual space for collaborative work that go hand in hand with the GDPR and the data protection policies at all participating universities.

2. It is therefore of utmost importance that the room of manoeuvre is reviewed **at institutional level** with the Rectorates, Data Protection Officers, legal departments and the IT management.

3. When designing a joint call at **alliance level**, an appropriate Data Protection Declaration should be drafted, consistent with the established Joint Controller Agreement, outlining the purpose, scope and legal basis of data processing as well as the duration of storage of these personal data, potential transmission of personal data, the rights of applicants and relevant contact details of the Data Protection Officers (DPO) at each Arqus university (see best practice example).

4. Ultimately, it is highly recommended to facilitate broader-scale co-operation between data protection authorities and stakeholders at local, regional, national and also European level, and encourage data protection authorities and stakeholders to cooperate with each other.

> ### Best practice example:
>
> *At alliance level, the Arqus European University Alliance has established a Joint Controller Agreement which reflects the arrangements that the Arqus partner universities have agreed to put in place to facilitate the processing of Personal Data relating students, graduates and academic and administrative staff of the participating universities between the partners acting as joint controllers, and explaining the purposes for which that Personal Data may be used. Within this Joint Controller Agreement, the Arqus partner universities determine their respective responsibilities for compliance with the obligations under GDPR (Art. 26 para. 1 phrase 2). They agree to process and to use the personal data within the Alliance in the terms set out in this agreement and undertake to implement appropriate technical and organisational measures to ensure and to be able to demonstrate that processing is performed in accordance with GDPR taking into account the nature, scope, context and purpose of processing as well as the risks of varying likelihood and severity for the rights and freedoms of natural persons (Art. 24 para. 1 GDPR).*

OBSTACLE 09.
Insufficient support for international mobility and collaboration

09

The process of organising joint calls requires somewhat deeper integration into and engagement with internal processes and procedures of each participating university. Calls for proposals involving innovative mobility activities are particularly challenging as such activities need to be formalised and managed in accordance with the internal practices and regulations of the individual universities. This means not only an additional workload for International Relations offices, Academic Affairs offices and similar structures, but also necessary expertise in these areas. This may result in a lack of human resources to fulfil the objectives of the joint call with regards to carrying out necessary formal procedures, or even to deprioritize activities arising from joint calls to the regular mobility activities at the university.

Furthermore, setting up joint calls that involve a mobility aspect is a complex task that requires not only an understanding of the administrative procedures, such as the time needed to perform administrative procedures or necessary documents to be collected from the awarded applicants, but also of the academic side of the call implementation, including the specifics of evaluation and recognition of mobility periods. During the process of setting up joint calls, a common challenge is the diversity of backgrounds and expertise among staff involved. Institutions require personnel with a well-rounded understanding of both administrative and academic domains. An imbalance between administrative and academic knowledge may lead to ambiguous or incomplete description of the call as well as an insufficient implementation plan for the activities of the call.

Another challenge in implementing joint calls is that once the funded applicants have been awarded the grant, they are often left on their own to execute the planned activities without administrative support or monitoring from the relevant internal university structures. Thus, in addition to executing the planned activities, which are supposed to be the main focus overall, beneficiaries spend additional time and effort navigating through and familiarising themselves with the administrative procedures, such as purchasing travel tickets, processing mobility agreements, etc. The additional effort required to be put in executing the activities, may significantly reduce the attractiveness of the joint call for potential applicants.

Joint calls require a consensus between all partners involved on the objectives, outcomes and results of the call. However, institutional strategies and priorities vary widely from partner to partner, and finding a common path can be a major constraint to such consensus. Partners may have different or even conflicting institutional priorities and approaches, so that a call becomes less specific in an endeavour to reflect the interests of all stakeholders and fails to set more detailed and clear requirements and more ambitious goals.

The following recommendations are therefore made at institutional level:

1. **Implement specialised training to involve more staff acquainted with both academic and administrative procedures.**

   It is recommended to establish sustainable communication procedures to facilitate collaboration and consultation between academic and administrative staff. Joint workshops or training sessions that involve both academic and administrative staff significantly contribute to reducing the gap between knowledge in areas related to joint calls. Training sessions for staff at International Relations Offices (IROs) and alliances could be offered in order to provide personnel with specialised training, covering useful information such as education systems/grading scales in other European countries, regulations governing Erasmus+ funding, study visa regulations, cultural differences, and general project management skills.

   It is important to document and share common procedures related to joint calls (for instance, through the creation of a handbook) to develop a common understanding of the process of organising joint calls, familiarise with terminology commonly used in the calls, as well as to reduce the learning curve for new staff members and those involved in specific calls due to the nature of procedures involved in call implementation.

Best practice example:

The Arqus "Handbook on joint calls" created in the framework of the Arqus Alliance responds to a need to standardise, helping the Arqus institutions to spare effort in drafting separate application and selection procedures, and to avoid any lack of consistency, while enhancing the visibility of joint initiatives, leading to a greater integration of procedures and regulations within the Alliance. It is intended to provide Arqus members with an instrument to develop joint calls for participation in jointly designed and fully integrated Arqus Alliance activities and also to make the offer of respective funding schemes available.

2. **Ensure adequate levels of staffing and ensuring a balanced and clear distribution of workload in key functional areas related to international mobility and collaboration.**

    Internal university structures, such as IROs, need to ensure adequate human resources to handle processes related to joint call implementation, alongside the regular tasks. Although the understaffing remains somewhat a challenge among a lot of universities, re-distribution of the workload and optimisation of processes may be a great alternative to hiring new staff in conditions of budget and other institutional limitations. Process optimisation can include breaking down all mobility processes in critical steps, and grouping similar steps from different mobility forms, for example, consolidating all student and staff mobility agreements-related work into a function with single ownership, so that this task is not duplicated in other processes. Besides, institutions shall consider involving temporary staff, such as interns or student volunteers to execute tasks directly linked to the implementation of joint calls. Training diverse skills of IRO staff allows moving staff across different tasks and processes dependent upon the workload in particular critical steps, when the workload increases due to carrying out the call. Also, investing in digital solutions that allow automating tasks, such as data aggregation and reporting, can significantly reduce the workload.

3. **Implement diverse incentives for participation, e.g. reduction of teaching/workload.**

    Institutions should incentivise staff to actively participate in various stages of joint calls. For instance, senior staff involved in creating training sessions for junior staff could receive financial support, grants, recognition, or a reduction in workload or teaching responsibilities. Membership of the selection committees for joint calls may be classified as expertise work and be counted as the academic workload.

Best practice example:

The University of Granada, as laid out in its Academic Organisation Plan for the academic year 2023-2024, offers lecturers reductions in teaching load in exchange for special management actions conducted in the context of international academic cooperation projects. These reductions include up to 10 hours for leading an Arqus working group or coordinating other activities contemplated in the Arqus work plan; and up to 30 hours for teaching in official Arqus Alliance activities.

Teaching load reductions are also provided for staff teaching in English or another foreign language - up to 20 hours in the first three academic years and up to 10 hours from the fourth year onwards. To be eligible for these reductions, it is mandatory to be a full-time member of the teaching staff.

4. **Allocate dedicated resource support to assist beneficiaries of calls participating in joint activities.**

It is essential to provide beneficiaries of the call clear guidance on which internal processes and procedures shall be taken within their planned activities. It is useful to collect relevant instructions or process descriptions from all functional areas or departments involved (i.e. procurement department for purchasing equipment or services, human resource department for hiring staff, IRO for mobility, etc.) and familiarise beneficiaries with them. In addition, we recommend allocating a contact person (ideally, someone involved in the call design process and having extensive knowledge of call implementation conditions) to maintain regular contact with beneficiaries seeking for support or advice.

Best practice example:

Within the framework of the Arqus Talent Scholarship Fund, the central administration of the scholarships awarded is carried out by the University of Graz, as already mentioned, specifically by a person who was and is involved in both the conception and implementation of the scholarship scheme. This means that the scholarship holders have a specific contact person at their disposal throughout the entire process who has extensive knowledge and expertise.

5. **Tailored support for unsuccessful applicants.**

Both **at institutional** and **alliance level**, support should be extended beyond the application stage. Thus, tailored support for applicants who have been unsuccessful in their first application submitted to a joint call can be an invaluable resource. This support can be offered in the form of training sessions covering various aspects, including constructive feedback on the application, Q & A sessions with successful applicants, and guidance on how to improve proposals in general as well as specific skills.

6. **Ensure coherent institutional positions and make sure that universities participate at the appropriate level in the design, implementation and evaluation of the joint calls, and ensure that they reflect and respond to their needs and expectations.**

Prior to designing the call, it is essential to agree on the purpose and main outcomes/benefits of the call so that it contributes, or at least, does not contradict with institutional interests of all participating parties. For that, institutions shall carefully consider the representatives involved in the call design process, ensuring adequate guidance, support, and mandate for them to act. We recommend organising preparatory meetings between staff involved in the call design and decision-makers in corresponding areas (e.g. academic affairs officers/directors), discussing several alternatives of call conditions/outcomes that institution finds appropriate. Developing alternative positions significantly helps in finding consensus between varying institutional priorities among partners.

OBSTACLE 10.
Lack of visibility and knowledge of European University Alliances and the opportunities offered to students and staff (including joint calls)

10

One of the major goals of the Arqus Alliance is engaging communities of students, academics, professionals and alumni working together for sustainable progress in key areas of human activities.

Formed by nine universities, the Arqus Alliance focuses on creating and supporting a positive change in the approach to teaching, study, research, openness, inclusiveness, cross-national and cross-cultural cooperation. The Alliance builds its excellence on a deep understanding of universities' responsibility for creating a positive and supporting environment for human growth.

The Alliance's offer is complex and highly responsive to modern issues.

However, we recognise that ensuring a sufficient knowledge of Arqus among alliance communities is an ongoing challenge. We consider promotion of the Alliance, both within each university community and externally, as one of the most important factors for its future success. Broad participation, inclusion of new participants, increased awareness of the importance of the Alliance among Arqus university authorities, promotion of the positive impact of Arqus on the academic community (i.e. through success stories) – these are some of the most crucial challenges for our Alliance in upcoming months and years. In order to help overcome some of these challenges, we make the following recommendations **at institutional and alliance level.**

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. **At institutional and alliance level, provide adequate support and guidance to the students and staff involved in joint calls, such as information sessions on administrative procedures and training support for applicants that fail the selection process.** Success in joint programmes depends on a number of factors, the most important of which are:

   ✓ Experience in joint calls (in the framework of Arqus or other programmes). People who have already had experience with joint calls and have successfully completed their activities are more likely to apply for additional funding for their ideas. They could become ambassadors for joint calls, if they are involved in the process of guidance for future applicants. Hence, webinars and online workshops with a hands-on approach as powerful tools for sharing information, experiences, best practices and success stories related to collaborative initiatives within alliances can be fostered.

   ✓ Well-established international (cross-university) cooperation or existing supportive tools or procedures that facilitate such collaboration. Joint calls are based on cooperation that goes beyond the alma mater and requires establishing well-designed tools and procedures, especially for newcomers such as dedicated websites, databases, common platforms, etc.

✓ Well-planned organisational and material support for applicants at every stage of the activity's life. This support may include: information meetings held upon launching the call, focusing on the most important parts of the call (requirements, eligibility of activities and expenditure, selection criteria, monitoring of the project); Q & A sessions and short video instructions published on the Arqus website, etc.. This guidance can also include the establishment of an *activity supervisor/mentor* (depending on the project complexity) that is available for the leader of the activity.

✓ Comprehensive and encouraging feedback and guidance for those who were unsuccessful in the application process (e.g. online or face-to-face feedback sessions with recommendations).

2. **At institutional and alliance level, raise awareness and give visibility to opportunities offered by the Alliance using the most adequate channels and tools for diverse target audiences, in line with the Alliance Communication and Dissemination Plan.**

✓ Promotion of alliances and the opportunities they provide should be an important part of each university's promotional strategy (newsletters, dedicated websites, social media channels). Scattered and irregular promotional activities often go unnoticed.

✓ **At institutional level**, creating promotional materials for prospective and current students, as well as including information about the corresponding alliance in already existing promotional materials, can be a valuable asset. When designing promotional materials, it is important to tailor them to the specific audience. We therefore recommend analysing the specific needs and habits of each group within the university community (i.e. students, doctoral candidates, postdocs, professors, administrative staff), keeping in mind the important role that social media plays in decision-making today (especially among people from Generation Z). Evaluating which social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube) are most popular among different groups within the university community and launching promotional campaigns on these channels can help attract new participants to the alliance.

✓ Engaging student ambassadors more deeply, not only in activities that are strictly addressed to them. It is important to identify new groups of students that might be interested in participating in Alliance activities (student research clubs, student organisations).

✓ Encouraging participants of any joint activities to share their experiences and impressions by sending photos, videos and reels, and by posting on social media ("success stories'' can be the Alliance's best promotion).

✓ Fostering participation of joint initiatives in local events: Local initiatives such as staff training weeks, European Researchers' Nights and student welcome days offer an opportunity to share details of joint initiatives directly with potential beneficiaries and staff involved. Presentations, networking sessions or even recreational activities (e.g. Kahoot) during these events can help make the university community aware of the opportunities available. Providing financial and material support for the participation of alliances in these events can help reach a wider audience.

✓ Inviting local media or business partners to Alliance events can help disseminate the ideas and values of the Alliance outside academia.

✓ Establishing institutional partnerships with media outlets: Helping Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) establish partnerships with local, regional, or even national media outlets can contribute to increasing the visibility of joint initiatives. Press releases and interviews are examples of tools that can help disseminate information about the joint initiatives carried out within alliances, and help reach a broader audience beyond the academic community.

3. **Ensure dialogue between institutional representatives in the Alliance with the broader university community at institutional level.**

✓ Regular visits of officers (and team involved in Alliance implementation) at the university departments (organising open meetings for those who are not familiar with the Alliance yet during faculty meetings). Involving the university community in the Alliance requires more than just online activities. Face-to-face meetings are very important because they provide new values and create opportunities for bonded cooperation.

✓ Participation of Alliance representatives (if possible) in internal university events dedicated to: quality of education, research development, international cooperation, student activities (e.g. short presentations).

✓ Promoting multilingual information campaigns: Institutions should consider disseminating information on joint initiatives in their local languages. This will ensure greater accessibility and inclusivity and help reach a wider audience of potential beneficiaries.

4. **Promote and facilitate the exchange and sharing of good practices and experiences among the universities participating in joint calls at alliance level.**

✓ Providing a space during the Alliance's annual conferences to share good practices, using less formal formats such as Open Spaces or World Cafés.

✓ Organising regular webinars/online meetings (addressed to all Alliance universities) dedicated to sharing experiences and focus on providing substantive knowledge as well (e.g "how to attract students to Alliance activities'' with a section conducted by an expert plus a space for moderated discussion).

✓ Dedicated space on the corresponding Alliance website – Success Stories (plus an annual vote for the most inspiring story, to be presented and awarded at the annual conference).

03. Summary of recommendations for authorities on the elimination of obstacles

Obstacle	Recommendations	Authority
O1: Different academic and research cultures and practices	Map current practices and resources, as well as to identify common procedures (which are compatible with all partners) that could be adopted for future joint calls, clearly identifying the steps, contact persons, etc. at each partner institution.	Alliance
	Appoint a selection committee represented by one jury member and one alternate member per university from various suitable academic fields and define selection criteria jointly.Communicate these criterias transparently. Create a transparent ranking and complementary comments.	Alliance
O2: Different deadlines for administrative procedures	Collect information that allows a harmonised timetable to be established. By identifying common deadlines that can be synchronised for all universities and different deadlines that apply to the partner universities, a uniform timetable can be established, which is an important tool for the entire procedure.	Alliance
	Allow, wherever possible, flexibility in deadlines to accommodate differences in administrative procedures across universities while ensuring alignment with overall deadlines objectives.	Institutional
	Work towards standardising administrative processes and pre-define an annual calendar for the publication of Arqus calls. This procedure will allow to publish stabilised and predictable information to the entire Arqus community, as well as to potential interested public in the joint calls.	Alliance
O3: Language barriers and communication difficulties	Take a proactive role in providing comprehensive language training and ongoing support for students and staff. The aim is to improve the language skills of participants in order to facilitate effective communication and collaboration in the context of European Universities in general and joint calls in particular.	Institutional Alliance
	Provide adequate support and guidance to students and teaching staff involved in joint calls.	Institutional Alliance
	Develop comprehensive glossaries and termbases. These resources provide a common ground for understanding project terminology and promote the use of a shared vocabulary among all participants.	Institutional Alliance
O4: Varying institutional priorities and expectations	Identify common ground and foster collaborative development.	Alliance

Obstacle	Recommendations	Authority
O5: Financial Issues	Enable Alliance centralised payment of scholarships and funds to students and staff at all Arqus universities - adapting payment mechanisms and regulations at the Arqus universities	Institutional Alliance Local, regional, national
	Enable flexibility in the application of financial procedures for alliance activities.	
O6: Differences in education systems	Map current practices and identify common procedures (which are compatible with all partners) that could be adopted for future calls with clearly identified steps at each partner institution.	Institutional Alliance
	Draw up alliance-level agreements on joint processes.	Alliance
	Fully implement the EHEA agreements and enable the Bologna process & tools, such as grade conversion tools, the ECTS user's guide, Diploma Supplement template application, etc.	Institutional Local, regional, national
O7: Lack of structures to facilitate connections between universities, researchers, research groups, who pursue similar research topics	Fully implement a dedicated support structure to provide guidance and assistance to academics in developing and implementing joint project proposals.	Alliance
	Encourage the development of European tools to encourage inter-Alliance cooperation.	European
O8: Data protection and compliance with the GDPR	Participation in the development of necessary tools within the Alliance that go hand in hand with the GDPR at all Arqus universities.	Alliance
	Review the room of manoeuvre with the Rectorates, Data Protection Officers, legal departments and the IT management.	Institutional
	Establish a Joint Controller Agreement (JCA) that regulates the arrangements that the Alliance partners have agreed to put in place to facilitate the processing of Personal Data.	Alliance
	Drafting Data Protection Declarations for the relevant joint calls which are in line with the established JCA.	Alliance
	Facilitate broader-scale cooperation between data protection authorities and interested parties.	Local, regional, national European
O9: Insufficient support for international mobility and collaboration	Implement specialised training to involve more staff acquainted with both academic and administrative procedures.	Institutional
	Ensure adequate levels of staffing and ensure a balanced and clear distribution of workload in key functional areas related to international mobility and collaboration.	Institutional
	Implement diverse incentives for participation, e.g. reduction of teaching/workload.	Institutional
	Allocate dedicated resource support to assist beneficiaries of calls participating in joint activities.	Institutional

Obstacle	Recommendations	Authority
O9: Insufficient support for international mobility and collaboration	Tailored support for unsuccessful applicants.	Institutional Alliance
	Ensure coherent institutional positions and make sure that universities participate at the appropriate level in the design, implementation and evaluation of the joint calls, and ensure that they reflect and respond to their needs and expectations.	Institutional
O10: Lack of visibility and knowledge of European University Alliances and the opportunities offered to students and staff (such as joint calls)	Provide adequate support and guidance to the students and staff involved in joint calls, such as information sessions on administrative procedures and training support for applicants that fail the selection process.	Institutional Alliance
	Raise awareness and give visibility to opportunities offered by the Alliance using the most adequate channels and tools for diverse target audiences, in line with the Alliance Communication and Dissemination Plan.	Institutional Alliance
	Ensure dialogue between institutional representatives in the Alliance with the broader university community.	Institutional
	Promote and facilitate the exchange and sharing of good practices and experiences among the universities participating in joint calls.	Alliance

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European University Alliance

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