

Milestone 10 Doctoral Interdisciplinary Methods Training



Una.Futura project Milestone 10 – WP4 Una Europa for Researchers





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Introduction

Since the founding of 'Una Europa', the alliance of European universities has advanced significant collaborative efforts in joint education, research and societal impact.¹ An important aspiration and guiding principle for Una Europa's 'transversal themes' includes the emphasis on collaborative interdisciplinarity in 'research, education and knowledge transfer' as well as an emphasis on 'providing a transnational framework for training targeted at early-career researchers'.² At the intersection of these ambitions and vision, PhD candidates, their supervisors and forward-looking PhD training play a crucial role. PhD candidates are not only at the forefront of advancing innovative research and societal impact at the as 'early career researcher', but also play an important role in research-led education and cross-border collaborations that often address cross-cutting research themes and challenges that require interdisciplinary approaches, skills and tools. At the same time, the skill sets and demands on PhD supervisors increasingly require the ability to supervise PhD candidates and projects that cut across disciplinary themes and boundaries.³ The growing importance placed on interdisciplinary trainings for PhD candidates has also been noted by a variety of European and international bodies and alliances.

There is therefore a growing interest, opportunity and need across the Una Europa alliance to provide more institutionalised and more structured training programmes **for both PhD candidates and PhD supervisors** to facilitate interdisciplinary research, impact and skills across various scientific and labour market domains. Una Europa is not only committed to advancing interdisciplinarity, but is also well-placed to facilitate a more collaborative approach to interdisciplinary training across its 11 leading European universities. In this light it is also noteworthy that the Una Europa 2030 Strategy stresses the importance of 'offering multidisciplinary research opportunities and networks' under its Strategic Pillar I.⁴

As a result, the Una Europa alliance has included a Deliverable for exploring the foundations and background for advancing a **Doctoral Interdisciplinary Methods Training** (DIMIT) framework (Deliverable 4.4) across the alliance.

Overall objectives and aims of the DIMIT Framework are:

- The overall objective behind the DIMIT Framework Deliverable is to explore the possibilities, demand and scope for more institutionalised approaches for supporting and advancing joint Una Europa-wide interdisciplinary training schemes. The beneficiaries of this framework include both PhD candidates and PhD supervisors and implies the active involvement of professional staff and those involved in PhD trainings and graduate schools.

¹ See Una Europa (2023) 'Voyage to a University of the Future: 1Europe Annual Report 2022', available online at <https://www.una-europa.eu/knowledge-hub/voyage-to-a-university-of-the-future-1europe-annual-report-2022>

² See Una Europa (2023) 'Visions and Action Plans on Transversal Themes', available online at https://una-europa.imgix.net/resources/Una.Futura-Deliverable-D1.1_Vision-and-action-plans-on-Transversal-Themes.pdf, pp. 28-29.

³ See Vanstone, M., Hibbert, K., Kinsella, E. A., McKenzie, P., Pitman, A., & Lingard, L. (2013). Interdisciplinary doctoral research supervision: A scoping review. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 43(2), 42–67; for a more recent PhD Candidate perspective, see Haley, A. Holmqvist, M. & Johansson, K. (2024): Supervisors' competences from doctoral students' perspectives – a systematic review, *Educational Review*, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2024.2306938, especially page 2.

⁴ See Una Europa (2023) Una Europa 2030 Strategy: Shaping our Shared Future for the Better, available online at https://una-europa.imgix.net/documents/Una-Europa-2030-Strategy_Shaping-our-shared-future-for-the-better_digital-publication.pdf, p. 5.



- The aim of Una Europa DIMT is not only to offer unique breadth and depth by drawing on the collective knowledge and skills of Una Europa researchers and supervisors, but also to contribute in the long run to a joint European doctoral training experience in the spirit of the European Higher Education Area. This framework can also lay the foundation for joint doctoral supervision related to various thematic topics that bring together different disciplines and for removing recurring obstacles and challenges across the Una Europa alliance that might make seamless cooperation in this area difficult. In addition, the DIMT framework also includes a component for PhD supervisors themselves by bringing together PhD supervisors to share best practices of PhD supervision and mentoring across disciplines.
- The aim of the DIMT Framework is therefore to facilitate the creation of a **joint methods training curriculum and framework that advances interdisciplinarity** and can serve as a supportive collective structure for joint PhD projects across the alliance, joint PhD supervisions, exchanges of best practices in PhD Supervisor training and further innovative activities in the field of doctoral training.
- Furthermore, the DIMT can serve as an important facilitating anchor point for more thematic PhD programmes and summer schools or trainings across the Una Europa alliance in **close cooperation with Self-Steering Committees' priorities**. To this end, DIMT also fosters mutually reinforcing synergies with the SSC Europe and the World (SSC EaW) on an Interdisciplinary Doctoral Training Programme (IDTP) that also shares many of the ambitions of the DIMT in terms of interdisciplinarity and a focus on both supervisors and PhD candidates who work on topics and policy challenges related to the overarching theme of 'Europe and the World' across the alliance.⁵

The DIMT framework and its associated activities should serve as a guiding structure for allowing alliance partners to exchange views and experiences on how to best advance joint doctoral projects across the alliance, joint PhD supervisions, exchanges of best practices in PhD supervisor training and to further innovative activities in the field of doctoral training.

⁵ See <https://www.una-europa.eu/focus-areas/europe-and-the-world>



Background on the DIMT Process Leading up to the Deliverable

The process leading to the framework document has rested on a variety of preparatory initiatives and collective input. The most important elements have been:

- Initial period of desk research on interdisciplinarity (including multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity);
- The design of an alliance wide survey for the purposes of a mapping exercise across the alliance in terms of current offerings, gaps and needs in the realm of doctoral interdisciplinary trainings in methods;
- The organisation of an [initial outreach workshop](#) on 26 February 2024;
- The organisation of an [in-depth design workshop](#) with experts on 22 and 23 April 2024;
- The creation of a DIMT working group with interested partners; and,
- The exploration of cross-fertilising opportunities for synergies with existing or planned Una Europa activities in the field of PhD training.

As a result of the mapping exercise and the February and April workshops, two working groups have been formed. The DIMT Working Group and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Training Programme (IDTP) Working Group 'Europe and the World' which continue to further develop both initiatives.

The working groups met online to discuss progress and to agree on next steps and also on a mapping exercise for the IDTP. Funding models were discussed as well as the ambition to further recruit additional researchers, doctoral supervisors and PhD School managers to the working group. These working groups served as an important collective sounding board and active forum of dedicated colleagues across the Una Europa alliance, interested in further developing the framework and share initial ideas and concrete course suggestions for a draft curriculum.

In addition to the working groups, the DIMT framework, objectives, and outcomes of the mapping exercise have been discussed and shared throughout the development process with the Una Europa partners at the strategic, operational, and project management levels of the alliance. This includes the Work Package 1 Coordinators, Doctoral Training Cluster, Senior Local Leads, Work Package Coordination, Research Strategy Group, Una.Futura Steering Group and the Una.Futura Executive Committee.

Towards a Joint Interdisciplinary Doctoral Training Programme

Whilst there is a wide range of possibilities and needs for interdisciplinary training, the initial scope of the DIMT Curriculum should be guided by pragmatism and by what is ‘doable’ in the first instance. This means above all that what is proposed here is not a compulsory comprehensive training programme, but rather a framework for flexibly co-developing and offering specific courses or training and exchange initiatives that can be implemented comparatively easily in a follow-up phase. The guiding principle is also to offer courses tailored in a flexible manner to emerging needs across the alliances.

Having said that, a joint DIMT curriculum should offer foundational courses in terms of content and conceptual insights, but also courses on interdisciplinary skills (both those required by PhD candidates and those required by PhD supervisors). In addition, the DIMT initiative should serve as a platform for stimulating mobility and the more flexible coming together for inspiring each other, mentoring each other and presenting and receiving feedback on one’s interdisciplinary project and method approach.

In this light, the initial core components of a DIMT curriculum are divided into three streams.

Stream I: DIMT Courses for PhD Candidates

The courses outlined in Stream I target the needs of PhD candidates in the realm of interdisciplinary methods. The proposed list of courses includes four courses – including one foundational course, one course on interdisciplinary methods and skills for tackling global challenges and two courses on interdisciplinary careers (one course for career paths within academia and one course for career paths outside the academic sector). It should be noted that proposed set up can also be delivered in a combined course rather than four separate ones.

| Proposed Courses |
|--|
| Challenges, Opportunities and best Practices in Conducting Interdisciplinary Research (Foundational Course) |
| Interdisciplinary Methods and Skills for Tackling Global Challenges |
| Interdisciplinary University Careers: Skills and Strategies |
| Interdisciplinary Careers outside Academia: Skills and Strategies |

Stream II: DIMT Courses for PhD Supervisors/ Support Staff

The courses outlined in Stream II consist of training courses for PhD supervisors to optimally support, teach, supervise and lead interdisciplinary PhD projects and support PhD candidates. The courses also include mentoring and intervision opportunities by colleagues. This also means that the DIMT courses and initiatives under this stream can lead to the formation of flexible teams of PhD supervisors across the alliance who mentor each other and share best



practices on coping with core challenges of supervising interdisciplinary PhD candidates and successfully leading and supporting the career trajectories and the needs of PhD candidates in the realm of interdisciplinary methods. The proposed list of courses includes three courses – including one foundational course, one course on interdisciplinary methods and skills for tackling global challenges and one course on how to build a strongly institutionalised support structure and environment for enhancing and supporting interdisciplinary research and careers - both in academia and outside academia. This course also includes the participation and perspectives of support staff and managers of graduate school to offer a truly integrated perspective, thereby also offering training opportunities that both academic and professional staff can attend. The course could also lead, in time, to the establishment of a support and best practice network for PhD supervisors and professional staff in close coordination with the Una Europa Doctoral Training Cluster.

| Courses |
|---|
| Supervising Interdisciplinary PhD Projects: Challenges, Opportunities and best Practices |
| Teaching Interdisciplinary Methods for Tackling Global Challenges |
| How to build and enhance a supportive interdisciplinary environment for research and successful career paths (PhD Supervisors and Support Staff) |

Stream III: DIMT Courses for PhD Candidates and Supervisors (joint)

The final stream of courses consists at the initial phase of an interdisciplinary research seminar series. This can be organised online and will give the selected cohort of PhD candidates and their supervisors the opportunity to present their ongoing work, share their challenges and receive feedback on interdisciplinary research, particularly related to methods.

| Course Title |
|--|
| Interdisciplinary Research Seminar Series |

Existing Courses by Una Europa Partner Universities: Towards a Common Basket?

In addition to the suggested co-created courses above, Working Group members exchanged ideas on existing methods courses that Una Europa partners could explore to open up to PhD candidates and supervisors from other Una Europa universities and partners.

In the common basket category, partners can also propose niche courses that are very specialised indeed in the scope of interdisciplinary methods or skills, that can then be opened up to Una Europa partners and thereby facilitate viability. The list should therefore also be expanded and continuously updated in the follow-up process. As a next step, and in line with Una Europa’s transversal theme of international partnerships, DIMT should be opened up to partners outside Europe and beyond. In addition, member institutions are exploring the possibility of signing mobility agreements for PhD candidates and supervisors as well as the development of potential Micro-credential courses.



Looking Ahead

As a next step, it is hoped that the DIMT Working Group further expands with interested colleagues and that the DIMT initiative receives further support from the Una Europa alliance to move from the reflection and framework phase to the concrete planning and implementation phase. We are convinced that there is added value and considerable demand for such an endeavour and look forward to supporting the next steps of this collective interdisciplinary journey.

An important step in the implementation phase, looking forward, is the parallel development of the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Training Programme (IDTP) 'Europe and the World' which has developed various cross-links with the DIMT Working Group and shares many of the interdisciplinary ambitions and approaches outlined in this Deliverable Document. A working group has been formed (which has been in regular exchange with the DIMT Working Group) within the Self-Steering Committee and is co-led by Universiteit Leiden, the University of Edinburgh and Freie Universität Berlin. IDTP seeks to carry out a similar mapping exercise as was done for DIMT and seeks to organise their first workshops for PhD candidates and PhD supervisors on interdisciplinary approaches to topics related to 'Europe and the World' in Summer and Fall 2025. It is hoped that the DIMT framework and Working Group members can offer important synergies and a wide range of interested colleagues in advancing together the concrete implementation of more institutionalised interdisciplinary doctoral training.

Similarly, there are various cross-links still to be made with other related initiatives running under WP4, particularly regarding the framework for summer and winter schools, 'Una.Schools' (co-lead with WP5, Una Europa for Learners) and the deliverable D4.3 'Feasibility report on the creation of a Joint Institute for Advanced Studies'.

It is hoped that the work carried out thus far and the core elements outlined in this deliverable will lay the foundations for the next necessary steps to develop innovative and well-tailored interdisciplinary trainings for PhD candidates and supervisors as an important pillar of Una Europa colleagues and our international partners. Next to a bold and ambitious vision a pragmatic and incremental implementation approach should be further advanced with a growing group of interested colleagues and in strong synergies with initiatives that will in time establish Una Europa as a leading hub for contributing to the European Education Area's vision of a trans-national doctoral education for interdisciplinary impact and progress.



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