

EU R&I framework programmes



Una Europa position paper





Context

This Una Europa position is considering the past, present and future European research and innovation framework programmes through the lens of a leading European University Alliance. It is directly informed by concrete experiences, primarily drawn from the Una.Resin project, funded by the Science with and for Society (SwafS) programme in Horizon 2020 (H2020), the Una.Futura project, funded by Erasmus+, as well as future ambitions and needs of the alliance in the area of research and innovation. It therefore zooms in on specific aspects that are of particular relevance to Una Europa and strategic collaborations of universities more broadly and focuses on key lessons learned and messages for the future, rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive analysis of all parts of EU R&I framework programmes.

The Una Europa partner universities are deeply international in outlook and engage in various international networks in the area of research and innovation. They have therefore contributed to the European Commission's ongoing public consultation via different corresponding channels – whether individually as institutions or at the level of stakeholder representation groups – in order to capture the breadth and depth of their expertise and experiences within the EU R&I framework programmes. This contribution should be seen to complement these contributions.

Introduction

European University Alliances are at the core of an innovative, globally competitive and attractive European Education Area (EEA) and European Research Area (ERA), and a means to drive the excellence dimension of higher education, research and innovation in Europe more broadly.

Una Europa is an alliance of leading research-intensive universities, who have come together in a values-driven alliance to jointly shape the future of high-quality education and excellent research of high impact in Europe and beyond. The Una Europa partner universities share an impressive track record in EU R&I programmes, securing a total financial contribution of **€1.5 billion from the H2020 programme** (2014–2020) and hosting **485 prestigious European Research Council grants** in the same period. In Horizon Europe, the universities have so far signed 474 grants, totalling €274 million. The scale, international outlook and complementary strengths of the Una Europa universities are the very foundation of the alliance's ambition to achieve greater societal impact, promote European values and drive the competitiveness of European higher education sector on a global scale. Such an ambitious mission does not come without its challenges. We are navigating a complex policy environment and funding landscape at regional, national and European levels that must still develop further to fully accommodate the ambitions behind truly seamless transnational collaboration and boost all types of strategic cooperations of higher education institutions in the future.

Key messages for the future

Based on our experiences as an alliance of 11 leading universities from across Europe, we advocate for a more **streamlined and strategic policy and funding approach** towards supporting higher education institutions as pivotal actors across the whole European Research Area in the future, following the core principles of excellence, impact and quality enhancement. This requires meaningful policy initiatives and dedicated funding streams at regional, national and European levels that support this strategic priority:

- **Development of a dedicated funding instrument** for strategic collaborations of universities that allows for co-investment of regional, national, and European sources and provides a long-term funding perspective across education, research, and innovation
 - Such a funding instrument should be competitive in nature and always be geared towards the principles of quality, excellence, and impact, in line with the core principles of the European research and innovation programmes, thus reinforcing the institutional capacity of universities to collaborate transnationally.
 - Importantly, this must represent an additional investment and not take away from existing research and innovation priorities and associated funding.
 - Recognition and support for the diversity of higher education collaborations in Europe is paramount for preserving individual research strengths, maintaining excellence, and delivering unique and innovative concepts for the continent and the world.
 - The next Horizon Europe Strategic Plan (2025–27) offers a unique opportunity to pilot this initiative, in view of a full roll-out of the instrument as part of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) from 2028 onwards.
- **Support for a true European Excellence Initiative** that provides systematic and long-term support to higher education institutions in all parts of the European Research Area
 - This action must be designed with a view to driving the visibility and global competitiveness of Europe's strongest higher education institutions on the world stage.
 - It should further include a strong component for targeted research and innovation actions.
- **Investment in collaborative funding instruments to solve grand challenges and to incentivise bottom-up research collaboration**
 - A shift from top-down instruments towards more bottom-up collaborative opportunities that are as open as possible in scope and allow for interdisciplinary research perspectives is needed to develop a true incentive for deep, long-term collaboration in a transnational context. The role of research universities in strengthening long-term basic research as a basis for innovation and solving grand challenges must be recognised. Individual researchers, who share this strong commitment to solving

the grand challenges of our time, need to be given the space to define the scope of their own research, in order to ensure the most impactful and innovative research outcomes.

- The next Horizon Europe Strategic Plan should thus focus on enhancing interdisciplinary research across intervention areas and more importantly across the six Clusters in Pillar II.
- In addition, a strategic approach to incentivise and reward interdisciplinarity in collaborative projects should be developed in the long-term.
- **Support for broad and flexible mobility pathways** for all, from early-career researchers to senior academics, is a key enabler to drive career development, encourage research collaboration and provide access to excellence and knowledge circulation across all parts of the European Research Area.
 - **Seed funding schemes** are an effective tool and incentive to strengthen ties between academics across departments, institutions, and countries. This is particularly important for early-career researchers, who can benefit greatly from such targeted actions.
- Such bottom-up instruments and mobility opportunities should also allow for participation from **international partners across the world**, geared towards supporting the most excellent research and innovation collaborations on a global scale.
- Ensure **openness to the world** of present and future European research and innovation programmes with a view to solving the most pressing global and societal challenges of today and tomorrow. It is vital to recognise that research collaboration knows no boundaries, which is why future funding support must be as open as possible to allow for close collaboration between higher education institutions irrespective their geographical location.
 - **Increase association agreements** for future research and innovation programmes to include more countries across the globe. We especially call for a smooth and swift association of the United Kingdom and Switzerland.
- **Creation of an enabling policy and funding landscape**, where interaction between the EEA and ERA is strengthened and strategic policy and funding priorities move towards common overarching objectives.
 - A stronger connection between the EEA and ERA will play a decisive role in the future landscape of European research and education, which is closely connected to the dual role of universities.
 - The next Horizon Europe Strategic Plan should include specific measures to increase the interaction between ERA and EEA, in line with the renewed European Research Area Policy Agenda, to allow for coordinated education and research strategies, policies and investments across Europe.
- **Stronger synergies between EU funding programmes**, notably Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe as well as regional funding wherever relevant, with a view to enabling universities as drivers of the Education Area, the European Research Area as well as the digital and green transitions.

Una.Resin – lessons learned

Una.Resin, Una Europa's flagship H2020 project, is key to driving our alliance's R&I dimension and our ambition of creating an Una Europa ecosystem of research and innovation. To take the first steps towards building such an ecosystem for seamless collaboration, Una.Resin provides the space for the development of first joint strategies and growing pilot initiatives to develop a more systematic approach and accelerate collaboration. In particular, Una.Resin is focusing on three key inter-connected transformation modules: Building a Common R&I Agenda, Sharing Infrastructure and Resources, and Strengthening Human Capital. Furthermore, three additional areas – cooperation with non-academic actors, open science, and embedding citizens and society – have been incorporated transversally in the project. Una Europa's academic-driven interdisciplinary Focus Areas – Cultural Heritage, Data Science & Artificial Intelligence, Europe and the World, Sustainability, and One Health – are central to Una.Resin's ambition and ideals. Based on the first phase of this project, we have come to the following lessons learned:

- **Grow buy-in of research community**

In order for policy initiatives within research intensive universities to become fully effective, researchers need to perceive a clear added value. Engaging the whole academic community of the universities is paramount, however, given the many competing demands that researchers have to juggle, it is also a challenge. Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) may not be the most suitable instrument, since the role of researchers in CSAs and the concrete added value for their work is not always clear-cut. In order to amplify the buy-in and active engagement of researchers, future instruments should combine institutional transformation actions and concrete opportunities for research that are targeted to increase the support base among researchers within strategic transnational collaboration.

- **Increase flexibility to focus on added value dimension**

The SwafS instrument has been a useful tool to kick-start first initiatives and mappings across a number of transformation modules in an alliance-context but at the same time, it has pointed to the challenge of working across numerous ERA policy priorities, which are often also the focus of other international networks. This first experience has shown that it is crucial for Una Europa – and alliances of universities more broadly – to be able to focus in the future on a number of policy priorities that are in line with overall strategy and vision and where clear added value can be created for the partnership.

- **Move from capacity-building to inspire global competitiveness**

CSAs are useful tools to support capacity-building actions and to initiate the development of first joint strategies in the context of transnational collaboration. At the same time, it is important to recall the role of European University Alliances as drivers of the excellence dimension of higher education, research and innovation in Europe more broadly. Therefore, Europe's strongest higher education institutions must also be supported to compete with players on the world stage. This move away from purely capacity-building actions will play a key part in supporting the role of Europe's higher education sector – and European University Alliances in particular – as a means to drive Europe's global competitiveness.

- **Guarantee sustainability of achievements**

The Una.Resin project has led to tangible progress in a number of areas, when it comes to mapping institutional strategies and resources as well as the creation of the alliance's first joint R&I Strategy. In addition, the project has led to the creation of a network of professional experts, such as the establishment of the Una Europa Clusters, with the institutional and technical expertise to continue to act as the backbone of this collaboration. However, the three-year duration of the project limits the concrete impact at institutional levels, which is a much more long-term process that transcends this period of EU funding. In order to be able to build on these first important results, further support within the upcoming period of the research and innovation programmes is key.



About Una Europa

Una Europa is an alliance of 11 leading universities from all corners of Europe. Together, they are forging a new path for education and research in Europe and beyond to shape our shared future for the better. The Una Europa community spans more than half a million students, 100,000 members of staff and 10 languages, grounded in over 1,000 years of collective heritage.

Una Europa partner universities:

Freie Universität Berlin | Alma mater studiorum - Università di Bologna | University College Dublin/An Coláiste Ollscoile Baile Átha Cliath | University of Edinburgh | Helsingin yliopisto/Helsingfors universitet | Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie | Universiteit Leiden | KU Leuven | Universidad Complutense de Madrid | Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne | Universität Zürich

Founded in 2019, Una Europa has secured successive rounds of European Union funding to realise its vision for a European 'University of the Future'. In just three years, the alliance's pilot project succeeded in launching nine joint programmes – [including Europe's first truly joint bachelor's degree](#) – transcending boundaries of discipline, institution, and country to take international collaboration to the next level. The alliance has also taken its first steps towards a common research ecosystem underpinned by a shared research and innovation agenda.

Guided by its 2030 Strategy, Una Europa is working towards a truly inter-university and pan-European campus, shaped by universities' universal and fundamentally interwoven obligations to society: research and innovation, teaching and learning, and societal outreach.

Visit una-europa.eu to learn more.

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