

# University Efficiency: What's on the Horizon for Research Managers?

By Thomas Estermann and Veronika Kupriyanova

## Efficiency, effectiveness and value for money: state of play

Over the last decade, policy makers and universities in Europe have been paying greater attention to efficiency and effectiveness in a more demanding higher education context. The USTREAM (Universities for Strategic, Efficient and Autonomous Management) project explored the concept and practice of efficiency from a university perspective. It delved into system, sector and institutional efforts to foster efficiency, effectiveness and value for money in all university settings: strategic governance, operational/professional management and academic matters (Figure 1).

Efficiency is found to be tightly linked to effectiveness, quality and value for money and thereby contributes to the achievement of the university's main mission. While it is currently mostly driven by decreasing resources, as well as new approaches to steering higher education institutions, the key enablers to more efficient and effective operations include institutional autonomy, leadership commitment and the involvement of all institutional actors in the design and implementation of the efficiency agenda.

European universities apply a broad range of practices to enhance their professional and support services. Efficiency in academic matters, including learning and teaching, as well as research and innovation, often takes place through collaboration between several universities. It can also come about through sector representative organisations, such as national university associations. At the system level, universities and sector representative organisations engage in policymaking to ensure that European and national frameworks provide enabling conditions for efficient and effective operations. Table 1 presents some examples of efficiency measures pursued by policy makers and universities at different levels and in various settings.

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Figure 1. USTREAM Approach

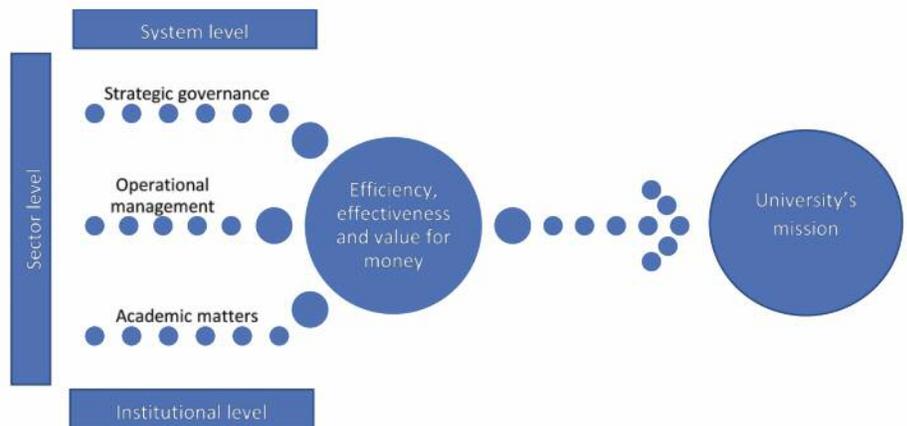


Table 1. Examples of Efficiency Measures

	Operational dimension	Academic dimension	Strategic governance dimension
System level	Land use Estate ownership VAT regulations	Programme certification procedures	University autonomy legislation Funding modalities
Sector level	Collaborative procurement Shared services	Shared research assets Shared staff	Exchange of practices Benchmarking Peer learning
Institutional level	Space use optimisation Centralised procurement Asset sharing within institution	Research profiling Review of the academic offer	Leadership and engagement Value for money reports 'Efficiency culture'

<sup>1</sup> The European University Association (EUA), one of the largest university associations worldwide, representing more than 800 universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Universities UK (UUK) and Central European University (CEU) are partners in the USTREAM project. USTREAM is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

### Fostering efficiency in the research context

Research managers play a key role in exploring new approaches to delivering on the university's research mission in a more efficient manner. They can help raise efficiency in the research and innovation context in several ways, such as by fostering collaboration; raising the efficiency of research partnerships through greater awareness and better management of costs; and communicating on value for money and research impact.

### Promoting research collaborations

Research managers can facilitate institutional and sector-wide collaborations and engage in a dialogue on respective goals and targets with university leaders, finance and human resources managers services, and faculty members. Collaboration offers possibilities to be more efficient in an increasingly competitive and resource-intensive university landscape. Research partnerships can be formed to achieve a competitive advantage and greater visibility towards funders and society through establishing thematic clusters as part of research profiling. On top of the main research goals, they often result in operational efficiencies that can be gained through collaborative procurement or shared access to research assets and infrastructure, among others.

Examples of such partnerships are quite numerous in Europe. For example, Irish universities successfully share research commercialisation resources and expertise through Knowledge Transfer Ireland (KTI). Furthermore, eight research intensive universities in the North England (N8 Research Partnership) share information and access to research equipment and major research facilities, provide guidance for equipment sharing, and develop related policy in the higher education sector, while promoting collaboration in two core research areas: Agri-Food and Urban & Community Transformation. Similarly, the Technical University of Graz and the University of Graz in Austria pursue a strategic partnership in the field of natural sciences (NAWI Graz) to engage in collaborative projects, jointly use infrastructure and operate core labs, train doctoral researchers and offer joint study programmes for bachelor and master's students.

The Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework (LEAF), developed at University College London in collaboration with several partners, offers a set of criteria through which single labs or institutes may be rewarded for good practice around sample management, equipment, procurement and waste, people, ventilation, and research quality.

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Further examples of such efficiency-generating partnerships can be consulted on the University Efficiency Hub supported by the USTREAM partners ([www.unityhub.eu](http://www.unityhub.eu)).

### Ensuring cost-effectiveness of research partnerships

Furthermore, research managers can promote greater awareness and more effective management of costs which can be incurred through participation in calls for research proposals and competitive R&D projects. The related expenses can be reduced through a more focused approach to participation and research profiling.

In the EU context, low success rates for receiving funding under the major research and higher education programmes, such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+, push universities to reconsider and optimise their engagement and co-funding strategies to align with long-term institutional goals, including both research excellence and financial sustainability. In many countries in Europe, universities are supported in applying more effectively for EU funds. It is up to research managers to identify and exploit such opportunities individually for their institutions or jointly with other partners.

### Communicating on value for money and impact of research

Research managers fulfil another important task related to communicating on socioeconomic value and impact of research to funders and other stakeholders. This can be done by means of value for money reports, which are commonly used by Irish and UK universities to report on the cost-effective achievement of their mission goals, or

intellectual capital reports.

Research portals provide another important communication channel that can be used to reach out to partners and stakeholders in an efficient way. For example, the German Rectors' Conference Research Map ([www.forschungslandkarte.de](http://www.forschungslandkarte.de)) presents key research priorities of German universities to a broad audience to increase visibility and promote international collaboration.

Efficiency is an important topic for all research universities with great potential to liberate resources for R&D and innovation. It is a collective responsibility in that all institutional actors and research managers should play an active role in mobilising efficiency efforts in the research and innovation context. ■



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