

POLICY INPUT

Building synergies between education, research and innovation by aligning the EU funding programmes

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INTRODUCTION

Building synergies between education, research and innovation across disciplines is crucial to tackling the major challenges our societies face. As the European Union projects ambitious policy goals, such as the Green Deal or mastering the digital transformation, synergies and complementarities between different funding instruments are becoming increasingly important.

Universities are uniquely positioned in this regard as they integrate education, research and innovation into their core missions. The European University Association (EUA) has been consistently advocating for greater synergies between these three missions at various levels. The sector's experience shows that by linking and combining them, we can increase quality amongst them all. The [European Universities Initiative](#) has brought new momentum to the synergies debate, as strengthening links between education and research is among its key objectives.

The present document is a contribution to this debate and focuses on possible synergies and complementarities between the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Erasmus+, European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and funding programmes at the national level. EUA has chosen these programmes for this policy input paper because they are of high relevance to research, innovation and education and universities. In addition others may become relevant in the future such as the new Digital Europe Programme or InvestEU.

ALIGNMENT AT TWO LEVELS NEEDED TO BUILD SYNERGIES AND COMPLEMENTARITIES

Alignment of funding programmes, to create synergies and complementarities, must be done at two levels, as laid out in this document: the policy priorities and programme objectives, as well as the funding rules and implementation modalities. Furthermore, sufficient and sustainable funding must be guaranteed.

This is a practical approach towards enhancing synergies and should be used to benefit all participants. It will require simplification and a strong thematic focus at the European level, as well as coordination within member states and regions in order fully use the potential of European funding.

Alignment of policy priorities and programme objectives

Stronger alignment of EU policies and instruments supporting education, research and innovation, as well as coordination between different policy frameworks such as the European Research Area and the Bologna Process would help to build synergies.

The European Universities Initiative, as a vehicle for universities to deepen their collaborations, can be an occasion to develop and test synergies and complementarities in practice. However, the approach should not be limited to universities participating in such an alliance, rather it should be open to all.

Alignment of funding rules and implementation modalities

In order to make synergies a reality and enable beneficiaries to pursue cross-cutting activities, the implementation modalities of existing and future instruments should be further aligned and simplified. Furthermore, sufficient funding must be made available to ensure financial sustainability of such initiatives in the long term.

In this context, several fundamental principles should guide the work of funders on synergies:

- A holistic approach to EU and national funding mechanisms;
- Consistent alignment of rules, both between the current and next generation of EU programmes, as well as throughout the broader EU, national and regional programme portfolio;
- Continuity with the existing best practice rules for participation, capitalising on beneficiaries' prior knowledge of such rules and building on prior simplification progress;
- Trust-based approach to funding and a broader acceptance of national and institutional accounting practices;
- Consistency in the robust implementation of all legally foreseen provisions for a more impactful simplification, especially those securing a broader acceptance of national and institutional accounting practices throughout the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation in particular;
- A variety of alternative funding, reporting and auditing models that can be selected by beneficiaries according to their specific interests and situations;
- An efficient and flexible corporate Model Grant Agreement serving the needs of various EU programmes.

SYNERGIES AND COMPLEMENTARITIES BETWEEN SPECIFIC FUNDING PROGRAMMES

EU Framework Programme Research and Innovation and the Erasmus Programme

Education, research and innovation need to be considered together in the implementation of the next generation of EU funding programmes to attain the related goals.

Regarding the content of the two programmes, it is important that both are flexible and give space to the development of linkages between different activities, particularly research and learning and teaching. Curriculum development should be informed by state-of-the-art research in the respective field and students should be actively involved in the research process. A common goal for the two programmes should be to further this linkage in research, as well as in learning-focused projects: The focus should be on looking for synergies and common ground between research and learning. In this way, when funding research, the potential for learners is taken into account, as is how research activities can be integrated into education activities to increase their quality.

On a practical level, this would include the possibility for researchers supported by EU funding to be involved in learning and innovation-oriented activities. Similar approaches could be envisaged for parts of the Innovative Europe Pillar of the Horizon Europe Programme, the new EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, (for example the Innovation Ecosystems instrument) engaging students actively in innovation and entrepreneurial activities, as is the case also with the European Institute of Technology (EIT). Similarly, integration of research-based learning could well be facilitated through the Erasmus Programme.

Regarding the European Universities Initiative, it is positive that the European Commission is seeking ways to support the research dimension of the Initiative. However, approaches that are currently being discussed foresee ringfencing funding under the current Horizon 2020 programme to make it exclusively available for alliances that have already been selected under the Erasmus+ pilot calls. This is problematic as it would artificially limit competition, give an advantage to those alliances that have been selected under the education-focused pilot calls. Meanwhile, there might be others that would work well together to attain the goals for institutional-level transformation on the research side.

EU Framework Programme Research and Innovation and national funding programmes

A holistic approach to national and EU research funding is needed in order to foster efficiency and long-term financial sustainability. The following set of measures would be a practical way forward:

Policy priorities	Implementation
Foster efficiency and sustainability of research funding at all levels (institutional, national and European)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simplify funding rules based on a broader acceptance of national and institutional accounting practices - Foster universities' participation and competitiveness in European instruments such as the European Universities Initiative through sufficient core funding and additional support mechanisms - Integrate the costs of unfunded proposals for EU programmes in the evaluation of success in national participation - Improve complementarity of national and European funding to universities by setting up additional dedicated funds for unfunded proposals of high quality to EU programmes
Achieve efficient and effective control over EU funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foster cross-reliance of audits at different levels and move towards ex-ante systems and process audits - Operationalise the existing agreements on audits between the European Commission and national funders - Explore opportunities for joint audit trainings, campaigns and secondment schemes - Integrate audit reports for national funding agencies into EU reporting to improve focus of current EU audit cycle - Test compatibility of national auditing practices to provide evidence of gained efficiencies and encountered challenges

EU Framework Programme Research and Innovation and European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)

Universities are contributing to regional development to a very great extent. In order to increase the impact of their activities in all the regions, there is a need for better compatibility and interaction between regional, national and European programmes. The synergetic use of funds can only be achieved with higher levels of strategic and practical alignment of different policies and administrative simplification of funding instruments. Sufficient and sustainable core funding of universities is a pre-condition for them to be able to make the best use of synergies within EU funding programmes which often come with substantial co-funding requirements. Using EU funding in a synergetic way cannot make up for a lack of national or regional core funding of universities.

ESIF funds are useful to build capacity for regions with lower intensity in research and innovation and make investments that can contribute to creating a level playing field for participation of universities in other EU programmes, including the European Universities Initiative. Beyond this, ESIF funds can build capacity, facilitate local co-creation and uptake of knowledge in innovation ecosystems. This includes physical infrastructures and environments such as science parks or integrating universities and other knowledge actors in local planning in order to ensure that these are a natural part of their environment and accessible to citizens, companies and other local actors. However, this requires a strong commitment by national and regional governments and actors involved to use the enabling conditions (smart specialisation strategies with a strong stakeholder involvement) and thematic concentration towards research, education and innovation in cohesion funding. It will also require simplification for the end users.

Simplification, strengthened thematic concentration, and enabling conditions – building on the experiences from the smart specialisation strategies – will be key to implement the large, European policy objectives on the ground.

Policy priorities	Implementation
<p>Bolster regional, national and European R&I ecosystems through smart specialisation and greater synergies and complementarities between ESIF and Horizon Europe</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening the smart specialisation and the thematic concentration in cohesion policy in order to further the knowledge triangle - Foster active and coherent stakeholder engagement to make multilevel governance mechanisms more effective - Simplify both funding instruments based on a broader acceptance of national and institutional accounting practices - Dedicate resources within ESIF to fund more excellent proposals for EU funding (e.g. proposals that have received a Seal of Excellence for their FP applications)

CONCLUSION

The range of European funding programmes for research, education and innovation has great potential to create synergies and complementarities that will benefit programme participants and Europe as a whole. Universities are best placed to use those synergies as the only institutions combining these three elements in their core mission. The main way forward towards harnessing this potential is alignment of policy and programme objectives, alignment of funding rules and implementation modalities and above all ensuring sufficient and sustainable core funding for universities at national and regional level.

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