



EU CONEXUS



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# Response to the Call for Evidence on

“European Research Area –  
the new ERA 4 years on:  
achievements, lessons learnt  
and the way forward”

20th of September 2024



ΓΕΩΠΟΝΙΚΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ  
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In response to the Call for evidence on the ERA we as a European Universities Alliance are glad

- to lay out the contributions we deliver for reaching the four priorities of the new vision for a stronger European Research Area and (prioritising investments and reforms, improving access to excellence, translating R&I results into the economy, deepening the ERA, and
- to propose further adaptations and instruments that are helping to progress and good ERA policies and practices

EU-CONEXUS is building up a Joint Research Area between its partners and beyond on Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability. This endeavour is not conceived as an activity separate from creating an integrated university system in the context of the European Universities Alliance. The Joint Research Area is the basic building block for the provision of internationally renowned educational offers and provides marketable innovations for the socio-economic environment. With its thematic focus it naturally contributes to the ERA priorities of prioritising investment and reforms in order to accelerate the green and digital transition and translating R&I results into the economy.

With regard to improving access to excellence, another priority of the ERA policy agenda, EU-CONEXUS provides a unique potential: people focussed on studying, researching, raising awareness. Universities have the unique potential of having all: students, researchers, and innovators. Sometimes, by the way, this is one person. European Universities have even more: they have the potential to complement and center their research-based education around a unique thematic focus by connecting regional socio-economic systems across Europe.

Based on its long-term strategy, vision and mission, EU-CONEXUS concentrates the creation of new knowledge on Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability, and this is done in a sustainable and long-term perspective. Even if competitive project funding will still be necessary for driving excellence, continuous support of EU-CONEXUS research groups can provide sustainability to a thematic research focus with high impact potential. A strategically chosen thematic focus is central in occupying researchers over the necessary time period for creating innovations. They will not turn to a different subject once a 3-5 years funded project is finalised and funding is available for a different subject in a different consortium. They will stay focused and increase excellence by deepening and widening knowledge. European Universities can effectively contribute to what the SDGs and also Horizon Missions are pursuing: sustainable long-term thematic focusing on finding solutions to pressing societal challenges.

Recognising the impact of European

Universities alliances on the effectiveness of the ERA and its policies could translate into providing a basic financial support for selected basic support structures for excellent research. The scientific programme of a European University could be subject to an intergovernmental convention/contract signed by the EU-CONEXUS universities and national and European funders. Concrete objectives can be set and concrete instruments can be envisaged in how to reach these objectives.

Some instruments that are experimented in EU-CONEXUS and could be object of such a basic support are listed below:

#### **a. Joint Research Institutes (Excellence Hubs)**

The EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Institutes are virtual objects for integrative networking that promote the exchange of research projects, identification of common research interest, development of joint research projects and the construction of the EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Area on SmUCS.

#### **b. Graduate Schools, Doctoral Schools**

SmUCS is a new focus area of research for which a new kind of researcher has to be trained. SmUCS researchers have an interdisciplinary profile, are able to look at the societal challenges from different viewpoints; they are engaged within local and international communities and they are not afraid to work with and within an entrepreneurial environment. These researchers need a new kind of institutional framework for their studies that European Universities are able to provide. They are constantly exposed to an international research community, they move seamlessly from one EU-CONEXUS university to the other, they have a complementary international network across the globe at their hands, they gain visibility based on thematic specialization and the scaling effect of the combination of institutional reputations, they speak multiple languages and learn multiple disciplinary vocabularies.

EU-CONEXUS is currently exploring the feasibility of an inter-university Doctoral School. A Graduate School can be a next step.

#### **c. Joint support structures**

Centralised service structures help in general the successful development of the Joint Research Area. Those are within the actual EU-CONEXUS environment mainly: project development support, scientific managers, transversal training offers (IPR, ethics,..), event organisation, administrative support for project implementation, collaboration platforms, Research and Innovation Information System, open science gateway.

#### d. Joint research infrastructures

Sharing and rationalising research infrastructures across EU-CONEXUS universities is currently explored and will in the end allow for significant economies of scale that are only possible within a stable institutional framework. The ESFRI roadmap and support in Horizon Europe for research infrastructures may not cover the range width of research infrastructures available at EU-CONEXUS universities as they cannot be put together under a mono-thematic framework. A cartography of a compendium of infrastructural devices and collections distributed across Europe with a long-term development and maintenance plan attached to it can be another one of the high added values of European Universities strategic cooperation.

We are convinced that funding the research environment for European Universities alliances could play a key role in deepening the ERA.