

# Mid-term assessment of the measures to promote research networks and mobilities

MS6

FINAL VERSION

WP8 Research Networking and Mobility

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# Executive summary

The European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability (EU-CONEXUS) aims to foster collaboration, innovation, and knowledge exchange among its partner institutions. Research mobility opportunities are a crucial component of this strategy. WP8 Research Networking and Mobility was established to manage and coordinate research mobilities among the partner institutions. Three major tasks were established: T8.1 launching calls for research staff mobility within EU-CONEXUS, T8.2 inviting external guest researchers, and T8.3 enhancing participation in international conferences. The University of Rostock leads the coordination of these efforts, collaborating with other eight partners.

The WP8 team prepared the calls for these tasks, which were reviewed and modified based on feedback from partner institutions. Modifications included clarifying eligibility for mobility, streamlining the application process, and setting annual and total expected mobility numbers for each partner institution. To ensure effective dissemination, WP8 collaborated with the Joint Communication Unit (JCU) to promote these opportunities through various channels, including social media and dedicated webpages.

The applications in the first half showed promising participation. By September 2024, WP8 recorded 77 research mobilities, 18 invitations of external experts, and 15 international conference participations. While the target for research mobility was on track to be met, mobilities under T8.2 and T8.3 showed room for growth, particularly in the invitation of external experts. Many of the invited guest researchers contributed as keynote speakers at EU-CONEXUS conferences. Participation in international conferences showed a significant increase in 2024.

Feedback collected through after-mobility reports and surveys revealed that research mobilities provided participants with valuable opportunities for skill development, networking, and collaboration. Some partner institutions initiated new collaborative projects with external institutions as a direct result of these mobilities. However, challenges were identified, particularly in terms of travel and reimbursement rules, which limited participation in some cases. Additionally, the after-mobility reporting system initially implemented in 2023 received limited feedback, prompting a shift to a simpler survey format in 2024.

WP8 plans to address these challenges by improving the visibility of mobility opportunities, redesigning the application webpage, and providing clearer guidelines for travel and reimbursement. Further efforts will be made to engage external researchers and increase participation in international conferences. With these improvements, WP8 aims to achieve its mobility targets and strengthen its research network, ultimately contributing to advancements in the field of Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability.

In conclusion, the progress made by WP8 highlights the alliance's commitment to fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among its partner institutions. The research mobility initiatives have already had a positive impact on the academic community, and with continued efforts to streamline processes and increase participation.

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## Description

### 1. Background and objectives

The European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability (EU-CONEXUS) aims to foster collaboration, innovation, and knowledge exchange among its partner institutions. Research mobility opportunities are a crucial component of this strategy.

EU-CONEXUS focus on the topic of Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability (SmUCS), which means to focus its education, research & innovation, and knowledge-sharing activities on defining, understanding and addressing societal challenges that are experienced by communities from urban and semi-urbanised coastal regions (rivers, seas and oceans).

To manage and coordinate research mobilities among the partner institutions, a dedicated work package, WP8 Research Networking and Mobility, was established. The alliance's partner institutions include La Rochelle Université (LRUniv), Agricultural University of Athens (AUA), Catholic University of Valencia (UCV), Klaipeda University (KU), University of Zadar (UNiZD), Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest (UTCB), South East Technological University (SETU), University of Rostock (UROS), and Frederick University (FredU), with UROS as the lead beneficiary.

The key objectives of WP8, established at the initial stage, are as follows:

- 1. Development of an EU-CONEXUS research community in following-up on tools and procedures implemented in the pilot phase. Developing research networking & mobility is part of the greater strategy for education in which students will profit from excellent research existing at partner institutions and because of the close Relation between research and education at partner universities excellence in research will ultimately lead to excellence in teaching.
- 2. Promotion of networking and multi-disciplinary interactions between the partners and international guest researchers in close cooperation with WP9, which provides important structures for joint research activities
- 3. Promotion of research staff mobility facilitated through Erasmus+ inter-institutional agreements of partner universities.

## 2. Tasks

Three initial tasks were defined by the Grant Agreement to achieve the aforementioned objectives:

### T8.1 Launch of a call for research staff mobility

Based on the experiences of the ongoing research staff mobility in EU-CONEXUS, a mobility call on SmUCS research topics especially for young researchers will be implemented. The call will further strengthen the cooperation between the partners and foster joint research activities on SmUCS research topics. In particular, the call aims to support joint research work and project development on SmUCS topics. In order to support a relevant number of researchers, staff mobilities of about 5 days are planned. In some dedicated cases (finalizing a PhD or starting a cooperative scientific project) longer stays are possible. In order to be able to take into account developments as well as current research projects of the alliance, there will be four rounds of calls, each of which will support up to 18 scientists. The most important results of the research visits are made known to the network in the form of Researchers' mobility reports and short communications e.g., on the website or in the newsletter. Mobility coordinators will help to organize and implement the mobilities.

## T8.2 Invitation of external guest researchers

EU-CONEXUS will support the invitation of excellent visiting guest researchers from outside the alliance at partner institutions to enhance the competencies of the EU-CONEXUS research community and to offer research-related teaching content to students. Each visiting scientist will be given the opportunity to present his/her institution and research areas. These presentations will be made publicly available within EU-CONEXUS as streamed scientific talks/lectures. Announcements will be made in the EU-CONEXUS newsletter, on the alliance website, and via the research staff involved. In quarterly calls, researchers can propose visiting researchers to be invited. The RC will decide on the invitations on a basis of comprehensible criteria to be fixed during the first project months. At least 15 guest researchers can be invited per project year.

## T8.3 Enhancing participation in conferences on SmUCS topics

An important task in EU-CONEXUS is to present outcomes and technological developments to the SmUCS community, either actively in science or in practice-related areas. For this purpose, participation of researchers from all disciplines in international as well as in intra-alliance conferences and other scientific events is to be promoted. Considering also the thematic interest and focus of the alliance the research council will regularly set priorities for participation in international events and will launch specific calls quarterly. Funding decisions on applications are made on an ad hoc basis and will be based on an evaluation of the relevance by a qualified subcommittee of the research council. At least 15 scientists within the Alliance can be funded per year. In addition to this kind of mobility, travel expenses of up to eight researchers and PhD students attending annual JRI conferences will be reimbursed (see WP9, T9.3).

# 3. Action and activities

## [2022.11 – 2023.05] Preparation of calls

Drafts for three open calls corresponding to the three tasks were created by UROS and revised in collaboration with all partner institutions. Two group meetings were held on January 23<sup>rd</sup> and April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, to discuss and validate modifications of the tasks and calls. The following key modifications were validated and confirmed by WP8 representatives and the Research Council on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023:

### A. Research staff mobility

- a) A dedicated application webpage will be created. Each partner institution will manage the application, evaluation, and reimbursement of T8.1 internally.
- b) Mobility to the JRI conference (also known as the EU-CONEXUS research conference) will be categorized under T8.1. Each university has a budget to theoretically support up to eight mobilities annually for such conferences. The annual and total target research mobility numbers are modified and shown in Tables 1 and 2.
- c) Eligibility for this mobility was further clarified. Target groups include researchers, PhD students, and research administrators within the alliance. Activities encompass research or training activities, conferences, or summer schools organized by partner institutions. Duration can vary between 3 and 10 working days.

**Table 1 The annual target research mobility number of each partner institution and the whole alliance for T.8.1**

	Mobilities to conference	Other research mobilities	Total mobilities
JRI Conference host	0	2	2
AUA	6	1	7
Other partner institutions	8	2	10
Total	$6 + 8 * 7 = 62$	$2 + 1 + 2 * 7 = 17$	$2 + 7 + 10 * 7 = 79$

**Table 2 The total target research mobility number of each partner institution and the whole alliance for T.8.1**

	JRI conference host	Mobilities to conference	Other research mobilities	Total mobilities
AUA	Yes	$6 * 3 \text{ yr} = 18$	$1 * 4 \text{ yr} = 4$	22
UCV / UTCB / UROS	Yes	$8 * 3 \text{ yr} = 24$	$2 * 4 \text{ yr} = 8$	32
LRUniv / UNiZD / KU / SETU / FredU	No	$8 * 4 \text{ yr} = 32$	$2 * 4 \text{ yr} = 8$	40
Total		$18 + 24 * 3 + 32 * 5 = 250$	$4 + 8 * 3 + 8 * 5 = 68$	$22 + 32 * 3 + 40 * 5 = 318$

## B. Invitation of external guest researchers and participation in conferences

a) A dedicated application webpage will be created. The application, evaluation, and reimbursement of T8.2 and T8.3 will be coordinated by each WP8 coordinator. A dedicated review panel, consisting of at least one researcher from each partner institution, will be established to evaluate applications.

b) Eligibility criteria were further clarified. Researchers and experts from universities, research institutes, or companies outside the EU-CONEXUS alliance can apply for T8.2. Their activities can include research or training activities at partner institutions or key lectures at conferences organized by EU-CONEXUS. Duration can vary between 3 and 10 working days. For T8.3, researchers and PhD students from partner institutions can apply for conferences outside the EU-CONEXUS alliance aligning with SmUCS topics, with a typical duration of 4 working days.

c) EU-CONEXA, a Belgian non-profit association managing common funds for the partner institutions, will collaborate with the WP8 coordinator for the communication and reimbursement of applicants. Clear travel rules are provided by EU-CONEXA.

## [2023.05 – 2023.06] Preparation for social media

WP8 collaborated closely with the Joint Communication Unit (JCU) to create webpages for all three mobility calls. Posts were prepared for different social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn), and template emails for dissemination within each partner institution were provided.

## [2023.06 – 2023.09] Launching calls and establishment of review panel

The launch of the calls was announced and disseminated through all mentioned channels. The application deadlines for 2023 were set for June 30th and September 15th. WP8 contacted the researchers nominated by each partner institution and established the review panel.

## **[2023.09 – 2023.11] Coordination for keynote speakers**

WP8 worked closely with the review panel to evaluate applications for invited keynote speakers and external researchers participating in the EU-CONEXUS research conference in Rostock in November 2023.

## **[2023.11 – 2024.01] Modification of calls**

Based on feedback from applicants and WP8 representatives during the 2023 pilot phase, a group meeting was held on December 6th to discuss modifications to the three calls for 2024. The following key modifications were validated and confirmed by WP8 representatives and the Research Council on January 16th, 2024:

### **A. Evaluation dates in 2024**

The application and evaluation of T8.1 will still be managed by each partner institution individually and internally. The application process for T8.2 and T8.3 will remain open throughout the year, but evaluations will be conducted quarterly in April, July, and October 2024, and February 2025.

### **B. Communication and reimbursement by EU-CONEXA**

After approval by the review panel, accepted candidates will be contacted by EU-CONEXA for a pre-check of estimated travel costs before any bookings are made. Once the pre-check is approved, the candidates can proceed with their bookings.

### **C. After-mobility survey**

Instead of an after-mobility report, applicants will be asked to complete a short survey to provide feedback and comments.

## **[2024.02 – 2024.03] Launching new calls**

The launch of new calls for 2024 was announced with the assistance of JCU on the EU-CONEXUS webpage and social media. WP8 representatives disseminated the announcement within each partner institution.

## **[2024.03 – 2024.09] Evaluation and coordination**

The first and second evaluations of applications for T8.2 and T8.3 were completed in April and July, respectively. WP8 collected all mobility data and summarized the mid-term report.

## 4. Summary of WP8 mobility data since 2022

The recorded WP8 mobility data for T8.1, T8.2, and T8.3 are shown in Table 3. More detailed information on host universities and traveling countries is provided in Annex 1. It is important to note that the mobility figures do not fully capture the efforts made by each partner institution in terms of dissemination and organization. In some partner institutions, similar mobility funds were already available, which, to some extent, compete with the EU-CONEXUS mobility fund.

**Table 3 Overview of WP8 mobility data and target mobility number of each partner institution since 2022**

	T8.1 Research mobility	T8.2 External Experts	T8.3 Intl. Conference	Total
AUA	8	0	3	11
FredU	7	0	0	7
KU	11	0	0	11
LRUniv	10	0	0	10
SETU	13	0	5	18
UCV	8	1	2	11
UNiZD	4	0	0	4
UROS	4	5	2	11
UTCB	12	12	3	27
Total <sup>1</sup>	77	18	15	110
Target <sup>2</sup>	158	30	30	218

<sup>1</sup> Until September 30<sup>th</sup> 2024

<sup>2</sup> Until October 31<sup>st</sup> 2024

### Research mobilities within EU-CONEXUS

The total number of research mobilities within EU-CONEXUS is 77, where most of them are accounted for the participation in the EU-CONEXUS research conference at UROS in November 2023 (64 of 77). The other research mobilities almost reach the targeted number (13 of 17). The target total number for two-year research mobilities within EU-CONEXUS should be 158 (each year with 79 mobilities, see Table 1). However, considering that the next EU-CONEXUS research conference (EENVIRO) will soon take place at UTCB, one can confidently estimate up to 70 T8.1 mobilities, which will easily reach the target number.

### Invitation of external experts

The total number of invitations of external experts is 18 since 2022, which already considered the invitation of keynote speakers to the EENVIRO conference at UTCB. It is clear that more than half mobilities under this category are used to support keynote speakers to EU-CONEXUS conference (4 to UROS and 7 to UTCB). The pilot year 2023 only contributed very limited number, whereas most



invitations happened in 2024 after improving the dissemination and evaluation process. Therefore, one can expect that through the improved produce, more annual invitations will come in next academic year, which can compensate the low mobility numbers in previous phase. More than half of the invited external experts are from non-European countries (see Annex 1).

### Participation in international conferences

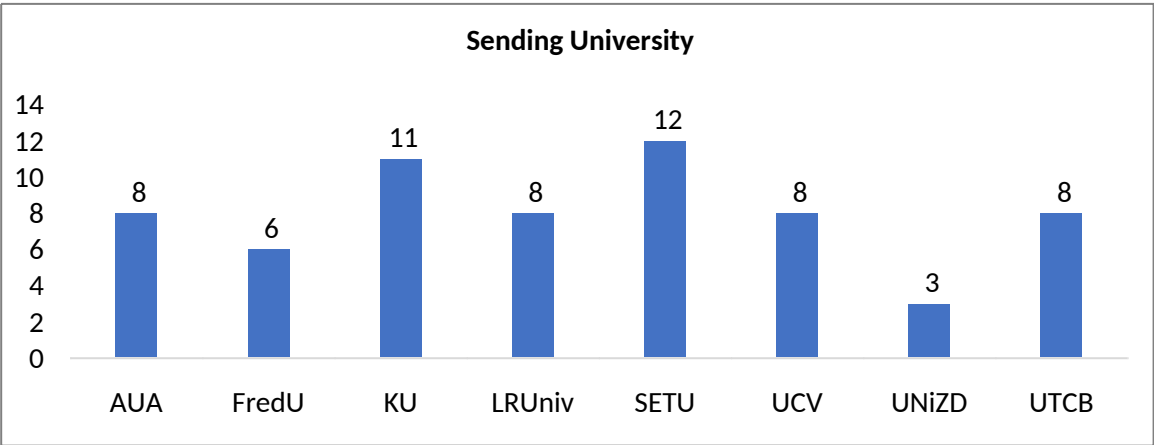
The total number of participations in international conferences is 15 since 2022. Similar as the invitation of external experts, this mobility category didn't perform effectively during the pilot year 2023 with only one accepted application. However, after the improvement of call, 14 mobilities were accepted just in the first half of 2024. Therefore, one can confidently expect that increasing mobilities to international conference in next years. Most of the applied conferences were located in European countries (see Annex 1).

## 5. Impact of EU-CONEXUS mobilities

The impact of EU-CONEXUS mobility fund was evaluated based on the after-mobility feedback from the participants. During 2023, participants of all mobilities were asked to provide an after-mobility report in written form. However, the feedback was not as positive as expected. Therefore, in 2024, a short survey was introduced to collect feedback and comments more effectively and evaluate the impact of all mobilities.

### Mobilities within the alliance

Although there is no after-mobility report from the research mobilities to the EU-CONEXUS conference at UROS to quantify the impact, the high number of supported mobilities undoubtedly provided researchers, PhD students, and administrative staff valuable opportunities to communicate with colleagues and peers (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Research mobilities from partner institutions to the UROS conference in 2023**

Besides the participation in the EU-CONEXUS conference at UROS, there are 13 other research mobilities among the partner institutions. Six of them participated in the after-mobility survey (Figure 2). The activities carried out during the research mobilities include training course, research visit and conference or workshop, where the participants number in such events ranged between 50 to 300. Though the mobilities, most participants benefited from skill development and knowledge transfer as

well as expanded network and connections. This was reflected on the initiation of cooperation. UROS is preparing for collaboration with Laboratoire de recherche en Droit et Management LITHORAL at LRUUniv regarding public management and comparative analysis. UTCB is working on cooperation with Waterford Institute of Technology at SETU regarding digital twin topics.

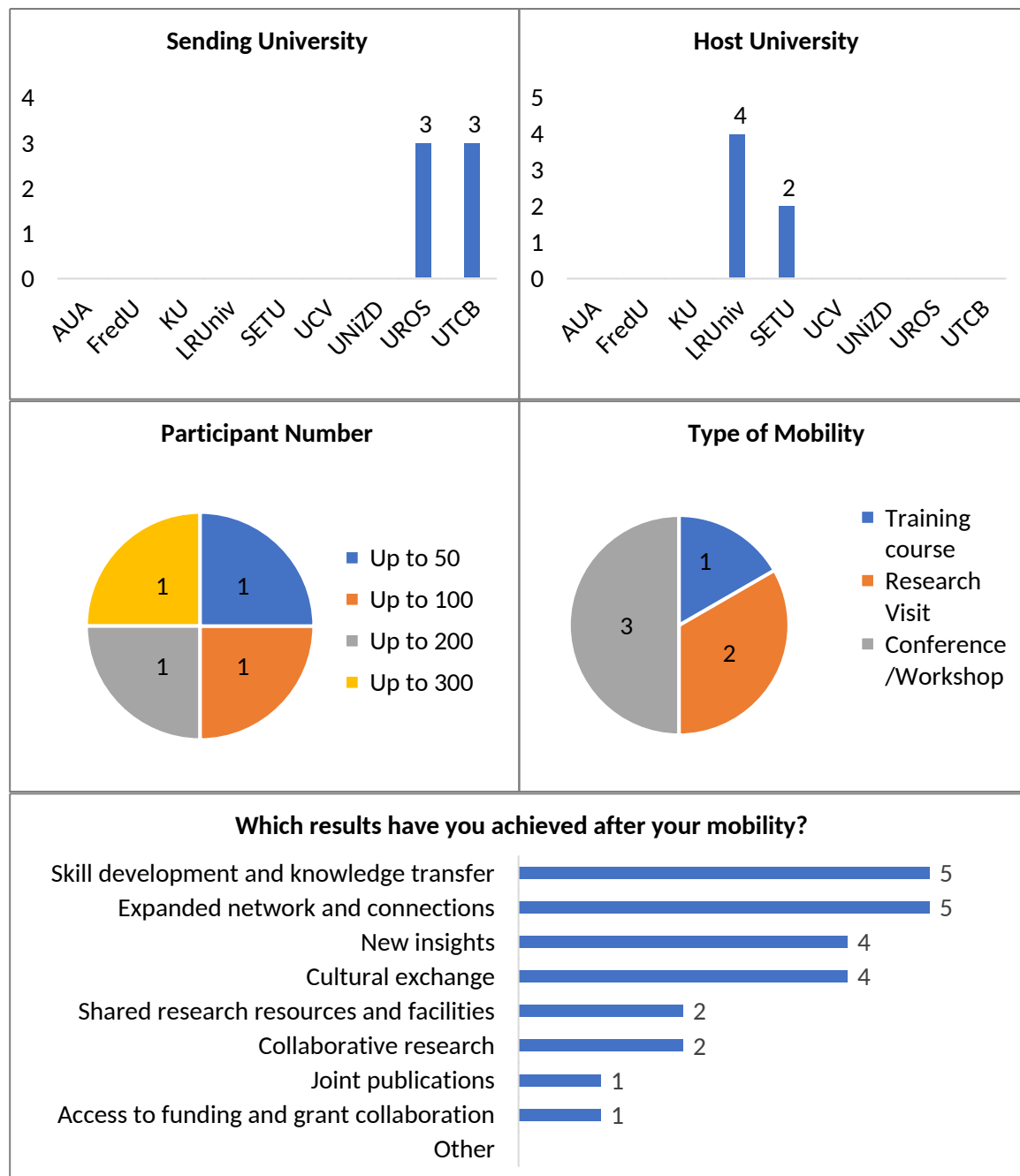


Figure 2 Research mobility data from reported after-mobility survey

## Mobilities into the alliance

The evaluation of the impact of invited external experts to the alliance was based on limited after-mobility data, with only two invited experts completing the survey. Since the survey started in 2024 and most accepted mobilities are not yet completed, a more comprehensive impact evaluation can be expected in early 2025. The two mobilities offering after-mobility data were from Colombian

Corporation for Agricultural Research (Colombia) to UROS and from Nantes University (France) to UTCB. The invited experts gave lectures and participated in research visit and workshop. Cultural exchange, collaborative research and expanded network are the main results from the two mobilities. The current cooperation between Colombian Corporation for Agricultural Research and UROS was strengthened.

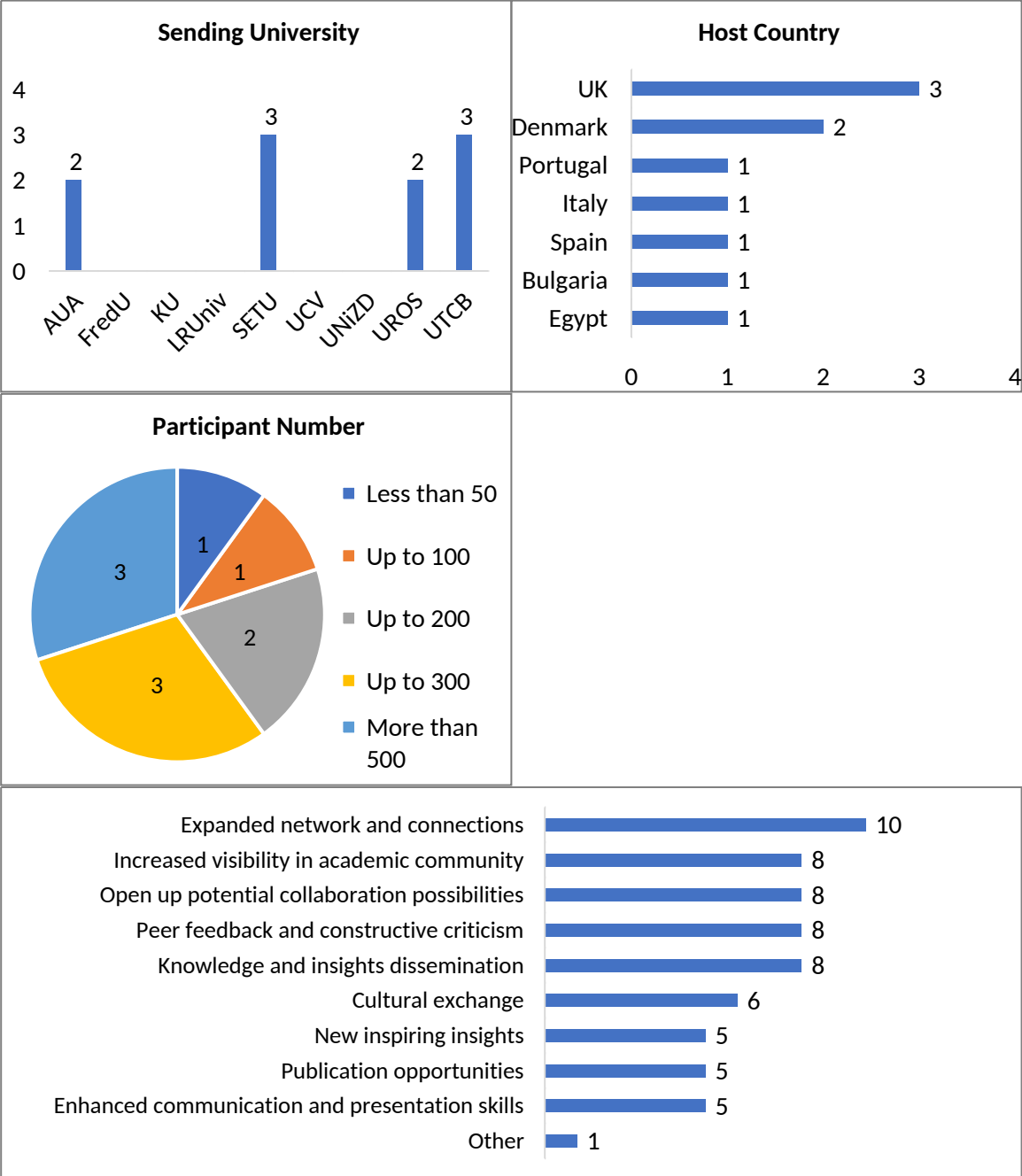


Figure 3 Data of participation in international conferences from reported after-mobility survey

### Mobilities outside the alliance

From the total 15 mobilities to the international conferences, ten participants filled the after-mobility survey and shared their feedback (Figure 3). From reported data, the participant numbers of the applied conferences ranged between less than 50 to more than 500, where two conferences had more

than 600 participants and one with about 3000. The most common achievement of all reported cases is expanded network and connections. Increased visibility, collaboration possibilities, peer feedback and knowledge dissemination are also important results. Four participants-initiated cooperation in various topics with other institutions via the participation in the conferences:

- Thermal engineering with the Technical University of Sofia
- Cross-disciplinary Environmental Technologies with University of Santiago de Compostela
- Laser- Induced Breakdown Spectroscopy with University of Putra Malaysia
- Plant microbe interactions (project proposal submission) with Cairo University

## 6. Problem analysis and future plan

To identify the current obstacles during dissemination and operation, WP8 representatives were interviewed or asked to fill a mapping survey regarding the WP8 coordination in respective partner institutions. The most common problem during the dissemination is unclear travel and reimbursement rules, which added the difficulty during promotion and reduced the interest of potential applicants. The lack of suitable existing collaborations for researchers led to the low participation rate of the T8.1 mobilities. A small number of conferences that meet the criteria of the SMUCS field and are of interest to researchers working mainly in the social sciences and humanities, which contributed to the low number of participations in international conference in some partner institutions.

Following modifications were planned for the next call in 2025:

- A redesign of the application webpage, including a flowchart to clearly outline the application and reimbursement process
- Improved visibility of travel rules by highlighting them on the updated webpage
- A comprehensive list of relevant research-related events at each partner university, which will be shared among all partners for better dissemination
- Inclusion of a checkbox for the after-mobility survey in the expense report to increase participation rates
- Mobility participants will be encouraged to share photos from their experience, which will be used for promotional purposes on social media

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## Discussion

This WP8 mid-term report provides a comprehensive overview of the progress and achievements in research networking and mobility. The milestones and deliverables established around research staff mobility, external guest researchers, and conference participation, have laid a strong foundation for fostering collaboration and innovation among the partner institutions. This report also highlights areas of improvement and future strategies to address existing challenges.

The initial success of T8.1 can be observed through the high participation in research mobilities, especially in connection with the EU-CONEXUS research conference. It is expected that the upcoming EENVIRO conference will help meet or even exceed the target for the two-year period. Other research mobilities apart from the conferences need to be further promoted and supported to ensure a steady flow of research interactions throughout the year. Furthermore, certain partner institutions faced

lower participation in research mobilities, possibly due to unclear travel and reimbursement rules, which is an area that will require clearer guidelines and better dissemination.

T8.2 demonstrated a more varied performance, with the majority of mobilities in this category supporting keynote speakers for the EU-CONEXUS conferences. While this approach has undoubtedly enhanced the visibility and interdisciplinary collaboration across the network, the overall number of invited external researchers is at the moment below target (18 of 30). The increase in invitations in 2024, compared to the limited invitations during the pilot phase in 2023, indicates a positive trend. A notable outcome of the external expert mobilities has been the involvement of non-European researchers, which has broadened the geographic and cultural diversity of the EU-CONEXUS network. This also highlights the alliance's capacity to foster global collaboration, which should continue to be a strategic priority. Nevertheless, the impact evaluation of external expert has been limited due to the lack of post-mobility feedback, which will hopefully be improved with the new survey process implemented in 2025.

The outcome of T8.3 underscores a significant increase in the participation of EU-CONEXUS researchers in international conferences in 2024, after an initially slow start in 2023. One of the key takeaways from the participation in international conferences is the enhanced visibility of the EU-CONEXUS network and its members. The reported outcomes, including expanded professional networks and potential collaborations with institutions outside the alliance, suggest that these mobilities have succeeded in fostering new research partnerships and increasing the profile of SmUCS-related research.

The overall impact of the WP8 mobilities has been positive, as evidenced by the feedback collected through surveys and after-mobility reports. Researchers and PhD students across the alliance have benefited from expanded networks, skill development, and the initiation of new collaborative projects. However, several key challenges remain, particularly in the dissemination of information and the clarity of travel and reimbursement policies. The introduction of a simplified survey process to replace the after-mobility report is a promising step toward more effective impact evaluation. This, along with planned modifications such as the redesign of the application webpage and clearer travel rules, should help streamline the mobility process and encourage higher participation rate.

The planned improvements in dissemination, evaluation, and reimbursement processes are expected to enhance participation and ensure that the alliance meets its mobility targets. Moreover, the ongoing efforts to engage with external researchers and increase conference participation will likely strengthen the alliance's international profile and foster new collaborative opportunities within the SmUCS research field.

In conclusion, WP8 has made decent progress toward achieving its goals of promoting research mobility, enhancing collaboration among partner institutions, and increasing the visibility of EU-CONEXUS in the global research community. With the planned improvements and continued dedication from all partners, the alliance is well-positioned to achieve its long-term objectives and make meaningful contributions to the field of Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability via research networking and mobility.

# Annex

## Annex 1 Host universities and traveling countries of mobilities from each partner institution

	Mobility category	Numbers	Country / University
AUA	Research mobilities	8	UROS (8)
	External experts	0	
	Intl. conferences	3	Denmark (2), Greece (1)
FredU	Research mobilities	7	AUA (1), UROS (6)
	External experts	0	
	Intl. conferences	0	
KU	Research mobilities	11	UROS (11)
	External experts	0	
	Intl. conferences	0	
LRUniv	Research mobilities	10	UNiZD (2), UROS (8)
	External experts	0	
	Intl. conferences	0	
SETU	Research mobilities	13	UROS (12), UNiZD (1)
	External experts	0	
	Intl. conferences	5	Canada (1), Italy (1), Portugal (1), Spain (1), USA (1)
UCV	Research mobilities	8	UROS (8)
	External experts	1	Ukraine (1)
	Intl. conferences	2	Spain (1), Germany (1)
UNiZD	Research mobilities	4	KU (1), UROS (3)
	External experts	0	
	Intl. conferences	0	
UROS	Research mobilities	4	LRUniv (4)
	External experts	5	Ghana (1), Sri Lanka (1), Portugal (1), Colombia (1), India (1)
	Intl. conferences	2	UK (1), Egypt (1)
UTCB	Research mobilities	12	FredU (2), SETU (2), UROS (8)
	External experts	12	France (3), Turkey (3), Ukraine (1), Ghana (2), Spain (1), China (1), USA (1)
	Intl. conferences	3	Bulgaria (1), UK (2)