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European Excellence Initiative (EEI)

HORIZON-WIDERA-2025-01-ACCESS-01

Type of funding: CSA / Action Grant Budget-Based

Expected Outcome:

According to the recent report on the future of European competitiveness by Mario Draghi (published in September 2024)[1], ‘the EU boasts an excellent university system on average, but its presence among the top world-leading research universities is limited’. The EU higher education system is quite inclusive and provides a high level of education and training to a significant portion of its young people. However, there are very large differences among European universities, and some perform very well in many respects. This action addresses this challenge by dedicated measures to reduce these disparities by raising the overall level of excellence of research undertaken in higher education entities.

Furthermore, this action contributes to the implementation of the European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe[2] of 5 April 2022 and the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-24[3]; ERA action 13: Empower higher education institutions to develop in line with ERA, and in synergy with the European Education Area*.*

The objectives of this action are to:

* Raise excellence in science and in knowledge valorisation through deeper and geographically inclusive strategic cooperation in alliances of higher education institutions, such as – but not limited to – European Universities alliances selected under Erasmus+, with a center of gravity in Widening countries;
* Improve global competitiveness and visibility of Europe’s higher education institutions, creating critical mass in key strategic areas stipulated in the political guidelines for the next European Commission published in July 2024[4]such as the Clean Industrial Deal, the Energy Union, digital tech diffusion, artificial intelligence, the upcoming European Life Science strategy, Union of Skills, etc.;
* Improve researchers career opportunities in line with the ERA policy agenda 2022-24, promoting a balanced circulation of talents, fair and modern research assessment practices in line with the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment[5], diversity, gender equality and inclusiveness, use of open science practices as well as the acquisition of transferable skills.

Proposals are expected to contribute to the following outcomes:

* Modernisation and upgrade of higher education institutions in the R&I dimension, through integrated collaboration between institutions and with other actors in local ecosystems and/or internationally;
* Mainstreamed culture of excellence in science and knowledge valorisation amongst higher education institutions, and particularly in less research-intensive institutions and countries, in particular Widening countries;
* Accelerated institutional reforms in the R&I dimension and strengthened R&I capacities in higher education institutions, notably those located in Widening countries, in particular leading to better research careers including in non-academic sectors;
* Strengthened digital skills and capacities including artificial intelligence of the R&I dimension of the higher education sector;
* Increased global competitiveness and critical mass of research in the European higher education system;
* Contribution to implementation of the relevant ERA Policy Agenda 2022-24 actions in higher education sector (Action 13: Empower higher education institutions and actions 1 to 9 under the header ‘Deepening a truly functioning internal market for knowledge‘, where relevant).

Scope:

The European Excellence Initiative in its widening dimension aims to raise excellence in science and in knowledge valorisation of Europe’s universities through cooperation. The action will engage with universities and empower them further to be actors of change in R&I.

By developing closer cooperation with economic and industrial partners within local and regional innovation ecosystems, academic researchers and support staff will be provided the opportunity to be trained in knowledge valorisation, entrepreneurship, access to finance, at any stage of their careers, and to take into account the variety of academic activities in their career assessment.

Cooperation of universities will be supported to create critical R&I mass and pursue specific objectives that contribute to accelerating key R&I areas of own choice with strategic relevance for the European Union.

The European Excellence Initiative in its widening dimension is, in terms of scope, open to any network or alliance of higher education institutions, such as – but not limited to – European Universities alliances selected under Erasmus+. In case of participation in this call such alliances may be represented by limited number of their members and may include entities outside the alliance for specific themes to pursue the objectives of this call especially in view of industrial co-operation and/or outreach to regional innovation ecosystems. Under this call the centre of gravity of the action is in Widening countries. Applicants are expected to convincingly demonstrate this geographical focus conceptually and by allocation of the major share of the budget (at least 51%) to participants from Widening countries.

Activities need to focus on research and innovation conducted in the higher education sector. Educational activities such as Master or doctoral programmes are out of scope of this call.

Projects should contribute to the implementation of ERA Policy Agenda priorities at the participating higher education institutions, notably the strengthening of research careers in academia and the reform of the assessment system for research and related careers;

Applicants are encouraged to implement the aforementioned European Research Area policy objectives and to consolidate institutional changes by means of a coherent package of activities structured into the following modules (underpinned with non-exhaustive examples of related activities):

1. Institutional modernisation and reforms

* Introduction of modern research assessment practices, in line with the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA);
* Application of modern management practices including improved research management and administration (RMA);
* Promoting interdisciplinary research entities.

2. Upskilling of research, technical and management staff

* Exchange of academic and non-academic staff for sharing good practices;
* Training and capacity building for research and innovation management including IPR and application of open science practices;
* Entrepreneurial and communication training.

3. Development of research excellence

* Sharing R&I capacities including infrastructures;
* Developing joint strategic R&I agendas;
* Seed R&I projects to test R&I agendas, explore new joint research stands and consolidate partnership.

4. Digital transformation

* Introduction of AI techniques in science and management;
* Concept studies for upgrading digital infrastructure;
* Data science and management.

5. Outreach

* Linkages with inspiring local/regional innovation ecosystems including industry;
* Engaging with citizens, cities, regions and other non-academic actors;
* Development of internationalisation strategies and partnerships.

Proposals should address at least four of the above modules and may propose concrete activities different to the examples given in the list above as long as they are in line with the objectives of this call.

Expenditures for research and innovation activities (see third activity under point 3, such as seed funding for collaborative research projects) cannot exceed a maximum of 20% of the total budget and need to be presented in a dedicated and distinct work package in the proposal.

The actions should envisage a duration appropriate to the ambition and complexity of the alliance of higher education institutions. The duration should not exceed 5 years.

**COMMENTS ON CORSAIR PROJECT**

Section 1.1.1 – It is a good section to understand the importance of Space Geodesy and Earth Observation (SGEO). However, I do not see any paragraphs on its importance at “innovation level” for markets and business. How does it affect them? Better satellite services? Better GPS? Better understanding of weather?

1.1.2 – Useful to understand NTUA’s capabilities, but not useful for our proposal in itself. While NTUA will certainly play the leading role in the project, the project should not be build around NTUA’s capabilities, nor can it be the center. Keep in mind this is about networks.

1.1.3 – The creation of a Center of Excellence for SGEO I believe it is a GREAT idea. Hosted by NTUA, that’s perfect too.

Then you proceed to enlist how NTUA will be benefited, but remember these benefits should be for ALL universities and organizations involved. Again, the main focus should not be NTUA.

Objectives look interesting, but they are missing actual numbers for the KPIs. Also, keep in mind master’s and PhDs are not involved in this (as per described in the call). I believe in general the objectives have a good sense to it, but we need to revise them in accordance to the change of activities and considering NTUA will no longer be the only benefited uni.

1.2.1 The pillars described do not cover all the needed aspects mentioned by the call. You are currently only covering: coordinator’s capacity for staff training, R&D administrative kills, networking in international activities for NTUA’s visibility. This is a major shortcoming, we need to re-address the whole concept.

1.2.2 I see descriptions of GNSS, SLR, etc…; which are good, but should be described in the focus of the network’s R&D topic. However, it does not explain how it will enhance research capacities of the involved orgs.

I like the Expert Nodes approach by western partners. Let’s talk about how to better execute this and what you have in mind.

We need to fully readdress the phases to achieve scientific excellence. The main problem here is that we are not covering all the expected modules proposed by the call. We have to practically create a new project concept and methodology.

1.2.3 Will be useful for this part of the project. But we need to expand outside NTUA.

1.2.4 Let’s see how to readdress the masters and phds that are outside of scope.

1.2.5 I like it! Very useful.

1.2.6 Will need to change completely. We need to set up a governance structure for the Center of Excellence.

1.3 Good but incomplete. We need to readdress it.

All of section 2.1 will change. However, our info is useful as inspiration for later work. Section 2.2 is good, but will also have to change a lot. We need to set up a DC plan for the Center AND the project.

We need to completely re-do Section 3 from scratch. Some tasks will be useful as inspiration. Yet, remember WPs must follow the proposed modules by the call.

Next Steps

* + Create a new project concept: Center based in Greece that unifies efforts on SGEO from a network of universities (?)
  + Start thinking of the WPs in accordance to the modules
  + Define the type of activities to be done by the center (re-visit the call’s description)
  + Define the governance structure of the center