



# accelerate futureHEI

supporting future focused higher education

## D1.3 Interim Policy Brief

22.12.2025



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



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## CHALLENGES AND ENABLERS OF INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS THROUGH ACCELERATION SERVICES

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DECEMBER 2025

### INTRODUCTION

Research and research-based education provided by European Universities are key assets for Europe's competitiveness, scientific leadership, and capacity to address societal challenges. Launched in 2000, the European Research Area (ERA) was conceived as a major political initiative to overcome the fragmentation of the EU's research and innovation system by creating a single market for research and innovation (Art. 179 of the Lisbon Treaty<sup>1</sup>). This involves restructuring the European research landscape towards greater cross-border cooperation and accelerating innovation ecosystems that convert scientific advances into societal and economic value (European Commission, 2020<sup>2</sup>). Together with the European Education Area (EEA), the ERA forms the foundation of an integrated European knowledge and innovation space supporting long-term European competitiveness and cohesion.

The Pact for Research and Innovation (R&I) and the **ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024** further reinforced the central role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their academic and non-academic partners as core actors within Europe's R&I ecosystems. As these actors play a central role in the creation and diffusion of scientific knowledge and innovation, accelerating these processes becomes crucial to deepening an internal market of knowledge (Priority Area 1), empowering HEIs to strengthen societal engagement and generate the skills and ideas needed to drive Europe's green and digital transitions (Priority Area 2), facilitating access to

<sup>1</sup> Treaty on Functioning of the European Union available at [https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2014/7/1/d01af422-e2dc-4980-beb8-212b436a05da/publishable\\_en.pdf](https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2014/7/1/d01af422-e2dc-4980-beb8-212b436a05da/publishable_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, "A new ERA for Research and Innovation", COM(2020) 628 fin., Brussels, 30.9.2020 available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0628>.

R&I excellence (Priority Area 3), and fostering the free circulation of researchers, scientific knowledge and innovation. In this context, the Pact calls on the Union and its Member States to take decisive steps to support HEIs in its pursuit of R&I excellence, capacity building, and societal relevance. Moreover, more recent policy reflections have further reinforced this ambition through the concept of a *fifth freedom* to enhance research, innovation and education in the Single Market. As highlighted in Enrico Letta’s 2024 report on the Single Market, completing the internal market requires removing persistent regulatory, administrative and institutional barriers that still hinder research collaboration, data exchange, mobility of researchers and transnational cooperation among HEIs<sup>3</sup>. In this context, HEIs and Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) are recognised as key enablers of the fifth freedom, given their central position at the intersection of education, research and innovation. Achieving this objective requires coherent and coordinated support for universities and their ecosystems across all levels of governance. Institutional, national and European investments play a pivotal role in advancing research excellence, strengthening innovation capacity, and equipping professionals with the skills needed to address emerging and persistent challenges (Priority Area 4).

Within this framework, the ERA Policy Agenda 2022–2024 introduced **ERA Action 13: Empower Higher Education Institutions to develop in line with the ERA, and in synergy with the European Education Area (EEA)**. This action specifically targets strategic institutional cooperation and identifies relevant policy and programme measures to support individual HEIs and their networks in implementing institutional changes aligned with ERA priorities, most notably strengthening research careers, mainstreaming Open Science, and enhancing knowledge valorisation. ERA Action 13 is structured around three core outcomes:

- 1) Supporting universities in their digital transition.
- 2) Developing a policy approach to equip researchers with the skills needed for an interoperable career within academia and beyond.
- 3) Developing a policy approach for future EU-level support to further develop Horizon Europe institutions, through the consolidation of the European Universities Initiative.

This is precisely the aim of the topic “Acceleration Services in support of the institutional transformation of Higher Education Institutions” (HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-51), under which three Horizon Europe WIDERA projects, CATALISI, Accelerate Future HEI, and aUPaEU have been funded. Although diverse in their focus and implementation approaches, the three projects share the same ambition: to design, pilot and implement acceleration services and institutional transformation models that support HEIs in modernising their structures, processes and governance systems in line with ERA priorities.

As the ERA marks its 25th anniversary, the adoption of the **ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027**, together with ongoing consultations on the forthcoming ERA Act<sup>4</sup>, are a renewed political commitment to strengthening Europe’s research and innovation ecosystem and institutionalising the *fifth freedom*. The new Agenda reinforces the strategic role of HEIs across several Structural Policies, in particular **Structural Policy 9** which aims at **Improving the articulation between R&I and Higher Education within the ERA and unleashing the full potential of European R&I ecosystems**. This includes the need to strengthen the integration of higher education’s four missions (education, research, innovation and service to society) by promoting interoperable, attractive and sustainable research careers, excellence and openness in research, a stronger education–research nexus, enhanced knowledge valorisation and societal engagement, and international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation<sup>5</sup>.

European HEIs thus lie at the intersection of multiple ERA priorities. Achieving the ERA’s long-term objectives requires HEIs to undergo widespread structural, organisational and cultural transformation, that foster institutional openness, enable career interoperability, reinforce knowledge valorisation, and strengthen international and intersectoral collaboration. At the same time, cultural differences, fragmentation of infrastructures, the absence of common operational frameworks, and varying institutional capacities and capabilities for stakeholder engagement may undermine uniform progress across European HEIs and their ecosystems.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Letta, “Much more than a market”, April 2024 available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/14608-European-Research-Area-Act-public-consultation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/14608-European-Research-Area-Act-public-consultation_en).

<sup>5</sup> <https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/era-structural-policies-2025-2027>.

In this evolving policy landscape, CATALISI, Accelerate Future HEI, and aUPaEU collectively contribute to ERA Action 13 and support the ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027 by testing practical mechanisms and co-developing evidence-based recommendations to empower HEIs across Europe. Their shared insights form the basis of this joint policy brief, which aims to inform future ERA policy development and guide the next generation of HEI-focused acceleration initiatives.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

### 1. Main results and obstacles encountered.

Across the three projects, several common achievements and tangible results have been achieved throughout these three years of implementation:

- **Co-design and operationalisation of acceleration services** at institutional and alliance level, including Living Labs, mutual learning workshops, Twinning exchanges and Communities of Practice, transformation pathways, digital infrastructures (the *aUPaEU Agora* platform and the *CATALISI Catalyst Hub*), and monitoring, evaluation and self-assessment tools.
- **Enhanced institutional awareness** of ERA priorities such as Open Science, research assessment reform, research careers, talent circulation, knowledge valorisation, digital transformation and external engagement.
- **Improved cross-unit coordination** and increased involvement of research managers, university leaders, academics, students and external stakeholders in HEI’s transformation processes.
- **Pilot activities** that tested new governance mechanisms, engagement structures, Monitoring and Evaluation practices, ecosystem collaboration models and digital infrastructures.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** almost 3.000 stakeholders are taking part in the three projects’ activities.

Figure 1 shows the geographical spread of stakeholders involved, demonstrating participation from a wide range of widening and non-widening countries as well as countries outside the EU. This confirms that the engagement was not limited to local contexts but mobilised actors across different parts of Europe, reflecting the cross-border relevance of institutional transformation. Figure 2 shows a detailed overview of the number of stakeholders per category (academia/research organisations; government/public authorities; industry/private sector; civil society) taking part in several different projects’ activities. What stands out is the strong involvement of academia, since HEIs themselves are the primary drivers of institutional transformation, while engagement from other sectors was more limited. These figures highlight both a success and a challenge: the projects managed to activate large and diverse ecosystems, however, a balanced and meaningful engagement across all stakeholders’ categories remains difficult.

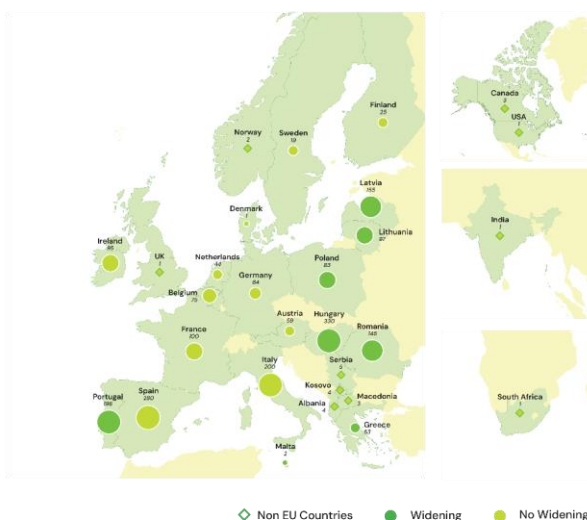


Figure 1 – CATALISI, Accelerate Future HEI and aUPaEU stakeholders by country

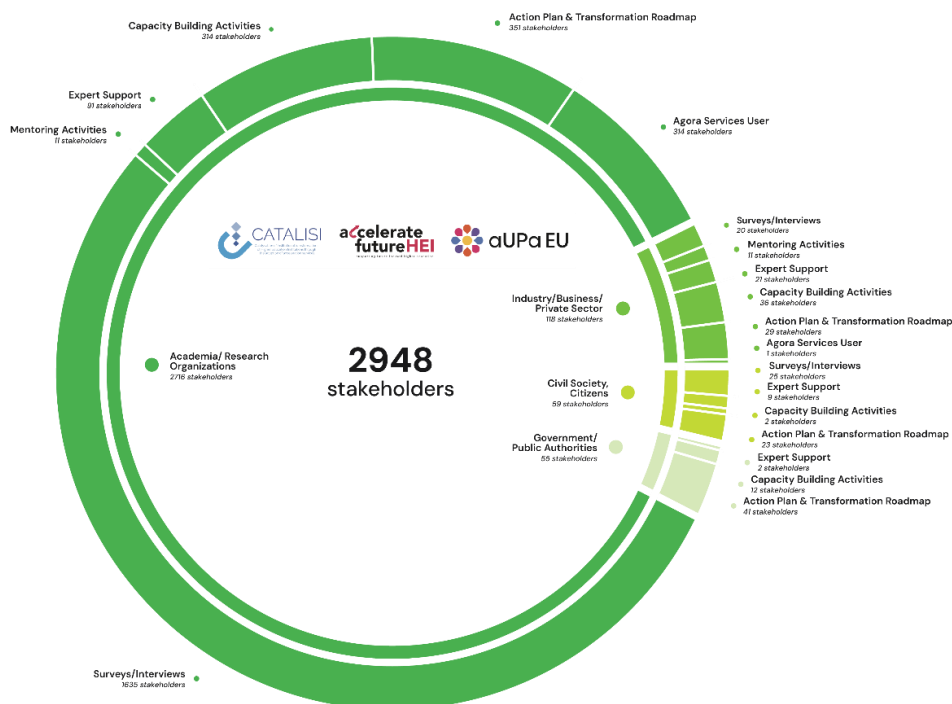


Figure 2 - Overview of the number of stakeholders per category taking part in different projects' activities

The interaction with external stakeholders across the various activities also enabled the collection and sharing of information on **common obstacles and barriers**. These were analysed, classified and discussed in-depth, and ultimately summarised into seven systemic macro-challenges that act as barriers to effective institutional transformation, along with one crosscutting consideration. These challenges represent **internal, external and mixed barriers** (influenced by factors both within and outside the institutions), underscoring the need for solutions at multiple levels involving the EU, national authorities, institutions, alliances and ecosystems:

Challenge	Barrier Type	Thematic Dimension
Shared definition and operational framework for acceleration services	External	Conceptual / Operational
Leadership commitment and cultural inertia	Internal	Governance / Cultural
Institutional capacity and coordination	Internal	Organisational / Structural
Stakeholder engagement and ecosystem anchoring	Mixed (Internal & External)	Institutional/ Ecosystem Collaboration
Sustainability and national policy support	External	Financial / Policy
Fragmented joint infrastructures	Mixed (Internal & External)	Infrastructural / Operational
Limited monitoring and evaluation capacity	Mixed (Internal & External)	Structural / Policy
Prioritisation and focus of transformation efforts	Crosscutting	Strategic/ Operational

## 2. *Most relevant joint findings in terms of methodology to support the stakeholders to develop in line with the ERA priorities.*

Despite the different implementation stages and institutional contexts in which the projects operate, a consistent set of methodological insights emerged on how acceleration services can effectively support HEIs and alliances in aligning with ERA priorities.

### 2.1. **Co-creation and knowledge exchange as driver of transformation**

Co-created processes and peer learning mechanisms, rather than top-down interventions, emerge as the most effective way to engage HEIs in transformation aligned with ERA priorities. Methods included: onsite Living Labs and co-creation workshops, Mutual learning and Staff exchange formats across institutions and alliances, Communities of Practice supporting continuous dialogue and problem-solving, focus groups and targeted consultations enabling HEIs to collectively define transformation priorities, models and pathways, co-creation of *Agoras* for European Alliances and co-development of acceleration services and joint platforms.

### 2.2. **Practical testing of acceleration services as methodological experimentation**

Iterative piloting allows HEIs to test transformation services in real institutional settings, identify what works, adapt services to context and progressively institutionalize new practices. This includes testing of pathways and governance processes; piloting entrepreneurial and innovation-driven programmes; experimentation of a shared digital infrastructure across alliances, self-assessment tools to assess readiness, identify gaps and prioritise transformation domains.

### 2.3. **Ecosystem-based stakeholder engagement and distributed leadership**

The projects highlight that transformation cannot be confined to the institution; it must involve ecosystem actors. Effective stakeholder engagement methodologies included: mapped engagement strategies, identifying relevant quadruple-helix actors, participatory activities, multi-actor knowledge exchange formats, Living Labs, which strengthened engagement through problem-solving in real-life contexts. Moreover, methodologies that foster shared and distributed leadership, including structured involvement of top-level leadership, empowerment of mid-level actors, and recognition of administrative and support staff.

### 2.4. **Methodologies for monitoring, evaluation and shared learning**

A common attempt to build and test monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices, including SMART KPI identification, alignment with the Theory of Change approach, reporting and assessment templates, stakeholder and external expert's structured and recurring feedback, institutional action plan monitoring, peer-to-peer and formative evaluation activities, and alliance-level feedback mechanisms.

## 3. *Complementarity between the three acceleration services projects and joint actions the three projects achieved together.*

The three projects have different focus of interventions: CATALISI and Accelerate Future HEI focus on individual HEIs, testing acceleration services through processes and methodologies for change, while aUPaEU works at the level of European Alliances, co-developing and testing joint digital infrastructures (*Agora platform*) which support existing and new acceleration services. Notwithstanding their differences, the projects also offer complementary insights:

- **CATALISI** focuses on institutional transformation across diverse HEIs, strengthening processes, coordination and adoption of ERA-aligned practices, especially with regard to Open Responsible Research and Innovation (Open RRI) practices.
- **Accelerate Future HEI** emphasises entrepreneurial and innovation transformation, building innovation capacity, ecosystem engagement and support structures.

- **aUPaEU** provides the interoperable ecosystem that allows institutional changes to be scaled across borders, by providing HEIs and their alliances, particularly those in widening countries, with a concrete, ready-to-use option to implement institutional transformation. Agora-based approach, aUPaEU facilitates coordination and integration of acceleration services.

Throughout the implementation period, the three projects collaborated extensively, generating shared evidence and contributing to cross-project learning.

Joint actions include:

- Co-identification of shared challenges, needs and barriers and evidence mapping.
- Joint policy, training and dissemination workshops (e.g. participation and organisation of joint events such as INORMS Congress Joint Submission (Madrid), [webinar with Inspiring ERA project](#), [Interreg Europe event](#), aUPaEU Agora workshop (upcoming January 2026), [CATALISI Final conference and policy session](#) - November 2025, Conference on *Research Careers* in Brussels - December 2025).
- Joint communication activities: Monthly communication meetings, featuring in each other's newsletters, [shared visual and brand identity](#), coordinated joint social media campaigns and communication strategies, shared event spreadsheet, featuring on each other's website, [joint 2025 annual wishes video](#), cross-promotional activities and reciprocal dissemination.
- Shared infrastructures, tools and services through the *Agora Platform* creating synergies with methodologies and services tested in CATALISI and Accelerate Future HEI, also through the establishment of a signed "AGORA" Platform Users Agreement, as a model for governance of shared digital assets and becoming the *Agora Platform* as the actual infrastructure of the Fifth Freedom.
- Creation of a common policy dialogue space: shared positioning towards upcoming ERA Policy Agenda, development of a common set of policy recommendations, presentation and discussion of recommendations within the EC workshop *Higher Education Institutions and Research Performing Organisations as enablers of the Fifth Freedom*, held during the [EU Conference on Research careers 2025](#).
- Joint Exploitation strategy through the Horizon BOOSTER dissemination module collaboration, and Joint [ZENODO](#) community.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4. Gaps identified in relation to the ERA policy agenda.

Evidence generated by the three acceleration service projects shows that while the ERA Policy Agenda sets strong strategic direction, several operational, structural and systemic gaps still undermine the ability of Higher Education Institutions and alliances to fully implement ERA priorities. Below, each gap is followed by joint policy recommendations emerging from the three projects.

- 4.1. Gap: Lack of a shared definition and operational framework for acceleration services:** A key challenge across all projects is that, while the HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-51 call, under which the 3 projects have been funded, and ERA Action 13 envisages acceleration services as coherent instruments for institutional change, evidence from the projects indicates a recurring lack of clarity and shared understanding regarding what constitutes 'acceleration services'. Acceleration services were interpreted and implemented heterogeneously across the three projects: sometimes they have been seen as methodologies, supporting tools oriented to help transformation processes within universities, sometimes as infrastructures. This lack of a common understanding, requiring repeated clarification from the "facilitating organisations" in the projects, created fragmentation and made comparison and scalability difficult. Further, implementing acceleration services remains difficult due to institutional differences in structures, governance models, and strategic priorities, so that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" model of transformation. This fragmentation limits the ability to combine, scale, and embed acceleration services for institutional transformation effectively: "acceleration" remains too broad as a concept, lacking a shared vocabulary or typology across EU initiatives.

## Recommendations:

- **EU level:**
  - Develop an EU-level operational framework for acceleration services, including a common definition, typologies, objectives and impact indicators.
  - Provide customisable services based on a common standard and promote modular and flexible acceleration service architectures adapted to HEIs needs. This harmonisation would enable shared learning and comparability among HEIs while supporting flexible adaptation to local contexts.
  - Potentially reduce number of acceleration services (primary and secondary), including clearer definitions and descriptions
  - Establish a shared knowledge base of methodologies, tools and case studies, drawing from WIDERA-funded pilots.
- **National level:**
  - Translate the EU typology into national guidance and policy instruments that support institutions in deploying such services, ensuring coherence with ERA objectives.
  - Provide financial and policy support for tested acceleration services to facilitate regional and national scaling.
  - Invest in capacity building, for example, by creating “transformation facilitators” within HEIs administrative staff to bridge EU frameworks and implementation within institutions.
- **Institutional level (HEIs and Alliances):**
  - Embed and prioritize high-impact acceleration services into long-term governance and strategic planning to ensure continuity and sustainability beyond project lifecycles.
  - Institutionalise proven acceleration services within long-term education, research and innovation strategic planning activities. Ensure that adequate training and support is available for their use.
  - Adopt more mutual learning activities, structured twinning and in-person exchanges to advance impact and collaboration.

**4.2. Gap: Leadership commitment and cultural inertia:** transformation outcomes are closely tied to leadership engagement and transformation is most effective when top and mid-level leadership (e.g. deans, vice-rectors or department heads) visibly champion the process. Evidence from the projects highlight that transformation slowed down when top-level leadership involvement was insufficient or uneven and that HEIs stress the need to integrate high-level decisionmakers in actions. Moreover, staff working on project activities perceived transformation-related tasks as unrewarded extra work.

## Recommendations:

- **EU level:**
  - Require demonstrable leadership commitment in future WIDERA calls (e.g. through letters of intent or participation in governance structures).
  - Ensure that European research career frameworks recognise engagement and transformation commitment as a valued academic contribution.
- **National level:**
  - Fund mentoring and leadership development programmes on institutional transformation, equipping senior and mid-level leaders with the skills and incentives needed to champion transformation.
  - Recognise and reward active governance engagement.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Create *dual* leadership models: senior endorsement & mid-level operational champions (e.g. research managers) to ensure both direction and implementation.
  - Embed transformation objectives in governance routines.
  - Integrate innovation, engagement and transformation contributions into career progression criteria.
  - Promote intercultural understanding and flexible collaboration models between HEIs.

**4.3 Gap: Institutional capacity and coordination:** HEIs, especially large and decentralised, struggled with silos, bureaucracy, resistance to change, weak links between research and education, fear of failure, and

poor knowledge circulation and collaboration across units. This makes difficult to align departments and faculties under a single transformation agenda.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **EU/National level:**
  - Support cross-departmental coordination and peer-learning mechanisms to strengthen internal alignment.
  - Provide incentives for cross-institutional collaboration and resource-sharing, supporting HEIs in co-developing shared governance and data frameworks for institutional transformation.
  - Support the development and adoption of open-source, cost-effective tools as public goods accessible to all HEIs.
  - Encourage public investment in shared national research and education infrastructures, ensuring linkages with European platforms.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Establish central transformation steering groups with department-level focal points, clear roles and incentives for participation (e.g. teaching relief, recognition mechanisms of the effort).
  - Provide clear onboarding materials, training, and well-defined roles and responsibilities for institutional contact points.
  - Engage institutional leadership and establish formal endorsement mechanisms, such as integration into internal websites, communication channels, or strategic plans for mobility and collaboration.

**4.4 Gap: Stakeholder engagement and ecosystem anchoring:** evidence from the three projects shows that stakeholder engagement remains weakly institutionalised within many HEIs. Although acceleration services such as Living Labs and mutual learning workshops proved effective in initiating collaboration, these activities often remain project-based and difficult to sustain beyond funding cycles. Moreover, not all quadruple-helix actors are equally relevant for all transformation processes, highlighting the need for more targeted and strategic engagement approaches. Limited ecosystem anchoring, low awareness of existing support and engagement structures to connect with industry or external actors, and insufficient coordination with regional and national actors further reduce long-term impact.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **EU level:**
  - Strengthen instruments supporting permanent engagement structures, in alignment with ERA Action 7 on knowledge valorisation.
  - Promote Living Labs and ERA Hubs that strengthen the third mission of universities.
  - Promote the HEI third Mission commitment within the European University Alliances.
- **National level:**
  - Fund regional clusters integrating HEIs, industry, civil society and authorities to foster long term collaboration and co-creation.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Promote institutional level Societal Engagement '3rd Mission' Strategies
  - Develop multi-annual engagement strategies, connected to transformation pathways and Communities of Practice.
  - Establish formal institutional support offices for engagement and valorisation.
  - Implement systems for expertise mapping and partnership tracking.
  - Recognise engagement work in career advancement.

**4.5 Gap: Sustainability and national policy support and alignment:** Institutional transformation requires predictable long-term policy and financial commitment. Currently, many initiatives remain project-dependent, with limited exploitation beyond EU funding schemes. Projects highlighted absence of long-term mechanisms to absorb, scale, or sustain transformation; scarce funding and high staff turnover which affect continuity; and high costs of digital transformation tools and services. Sustained political and financial commitment is therefore necessary to institutionalize progress.

## Recommendations:

- **EU level:**
  - Establish follow-up schemes for tested and high-impact acceleration services beyond project life cycles.
  - Strengthen investment strategy planning in all acceleration efforts.
- **National level:**
  - Provide multi-year predictable funding for institutional transformation.
  - Integrate HEI's transformation within national R&I and education strategies.
  - Prioritise joint initiatives and interoperable solutions across HEIs and alliances.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Develop sustainability and ownership plans.
  - Align transformation actions with institutional and Alliance missions.
  - Align transformation efforts to national reforms and EU frameworks for deeper change (e.g. DORA, CoARA).

**4.6 Gap: Fragmented joint infrastructures:** transformative processes within the ERA rely on shared infrastructures and interoperable mechanisms that enable HEIs and their alliances to collaborate effectively. Yet, across the projects, a systemic challenge has emerged: the fragmentation of common infrastructures, digital tools, and governance mechanisms underpinning institutional acceleration that undermines collaboration, tool scalability and efficient sharing of resources and practices. Heterogeneity among universities and HEIs creates a persistent tension between the benefits of customization and co-creation versus the need for standardization to scale and ensure sustainability, slowing the pace of adoption of acceleration services. Different services hold different values for these institutions depending on their strategic priorities, organizational structures, and digital maturity.

## Recommendations:

- **EU/National level:**
  - Promote co-designed, open, and modular digital infrastructure standards to reduce fragmentation and foster cross-border collaboration within the ERA.
  - Establish funding schemes for shared infrastructures within alliances and regional networks to ensure inclusiveness.
  - Adopt shared policies to align digital governance and resource use across Alliances.
  - Align digitalization and R&I policies with interoperability standards for the ERA.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Invest in interoperable solutions and shared architectures across alliances to enable resource pooling and data exchange. Joint current research information systems (CRIS), for example, could be used to enhance the integration and exchange of research information across HEIs.
  - Adopt shared digital platforms and infrastructures to reduce duplication and strengthen coordination across borders. We highly recommend prioritizing open-source solutions in order to bolster the resilience of digital infrastructures as well as digital sovereignty at large, as well as the use of AI-based tools for information discovery and researcher matchmaking<sup>6</sup>.
  - Ensure adequate awareness, guidance, training and design optimisation for user adoption.

**4.7 Gap: Limited monitoring and evaluation capacity:** All projects reported insufficient monitoring tools, and lack of common indicators and harmonised benchmarks for tracking transformation and its impact. Moreover, HEIs action Plans' definition and KPIs identification occurred late, complicating consistent monitoring across HEIs. This challenge limited the assessment of progress across institutions/projects and reduced comparability of outcomes.

## Recommendations:

- **EU level:**

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<sup>6</sup> aUPaEU D3.1 Report on available data sources, recommendations regarding the scope of the platform, schema of access rights for users in the created system and intelligent search methods (available at <https://zenodo.org/records/17106651>)

- Develop shared ERA indicators and systems for institutional transformation and valorisation.
- Provide open M&E templates and dashboards for ERA-related transformations.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Adopt harmonise internal M&E practices and integrate impact tracking into institutional systems.
  - Adopt both formative and summative assessment methodologies to track progress and impact of institutional transformation efforts and enhance assessment capacities of HEIs.

**4.8 Crosscutting consideration: Prioritisation and focus of transformation efforts:** Evidence from the three projects suggests that an overly broad scope of interventions may dilute focus and hinder the depth of transformation achieved across HEIs. In CATALISI, 14 intervention areas proved too ambitious; HEIs that concentrated on a few high-impact domains (e.g. Open Science, research assessment and talent circulation) achieved more consistent progress. aUPaEU partners stressed the importance of prioritising acceleration processes according to institutional readiness and strategic needs. Since participating institutions in Accelerate Future HEI pursued diverse transformation domains, some focusing on digital transformation and others on entrepreneurial and innovation transformation it has been challenging to establish common benchmarks and measure comparable impact across the consortium. While flexibility remains essential, given the varying maturity and contexts of HEIs, greater focus and sequencing of transformation actions could enhance measurable impact.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **EU level:**
  - Encourage phased transformation programmes focused on key areas (e.g. Open Science, research assessment, talent circulation, engagement, digital transformation) in future WIDERA calls.
  - The selection of key areas of transformation should be both top-down and bottom-up considering HEIs' needs.
- **National level:**
  - Provide diagnostic tools to help HEIs identify 3–5 priority areas for transformation, aligned with national and EU strategic goals.
- **Institutional level:**
  - Use self-assessment and internal action plans to identify and prioritise transformation domains with highest potential impact.
  - Narrow the focus, ensuring a right balance between ambition and realism on what can be achieved during a given period.

**5. Actions in the policy agenda for which universities need more support, in addition to those that the three projects already cover.**

The evidence emerging from CATALISI, Accelerate Future HEI and aUPaEU shows that universities require **further targeted and structural support** to deliver the ambitions of the ERA Policy Agenda. The following represent the most critical structural policies from ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 where future EU-level action, including new Acceleration Services calls, would be most impactful<sup>7</sup>.

1. Enabling Open Science via sharing and re-use of data, including through the European Open Science Cloud (ESCO).
2. Strengthening sustainability, accessibility and resilience of research infrastructures in the ERA.
3. Making research careers more attractive and sustainable and support mobility.
4. Reforming Research assessment.
5. Upscaling knowledge valorisation capacities and activities.
6. Improving the articulation between R&I and higher education within the ERA and unleashing the full potential of European R&I ecosystems.
7. Enhancing trust in science through citizen participation, engagement and science communication.

<sup>7</sup> These needs are also reflected in the **Slido prioritisation exercise** conducted during the CATALISI final conference (policy validation session), which highlights key areas where HEIs expect future EU intervention.

## 6. Projects' outputs worth promoting.

Across the three projects, several high-value outputs have been developed that are immediately suitable for wider dissemination through REA Communication services, the ERA Platform, and future ERA policy cycles. These outputs provide practical tools, methodologies, digital infrastructures and evidence that can support HEIs, Universities Alliances and policymakers in implementing the ERA Policy Agenda. Below is a consolidated list of outputs considered most relevant for EU-level promotion.

### CATALISI:

- The [Replicable Framework of Acceleration Services](#): step-by-step methodological framework supporting HEIs in operationalising acceleration services, implementing institutional change pathways, and aligning governance structures with ERA priorities.
- [Acceleration Services Booklet](#): guidance and practical examples on running Living Labs, co-creation workshops, Coaching and mentoring, Knowledge sharing and Mutual Learning methodologies, amongst others acceleration services.
- [Stories of Transformation Booklet](#): A practical booklet synthesising inspirational achievements, lessons learned across the 7 participating HEIs, including examples of good practices, challenges and transferable actions on ERA aligned priorities.
- [CATALYST Hub](#) (online platform): A digital hub hosting [training materials](#), [funding](#) and [collaboration opportunities](#) for HEIs and research organisations.
- Self-assessment Tools and **Action Plans** ([D1.1](#) and [D1.2](#); D.3.2, upcoming): identify gaps and prioritise ERA-aligned intervention areas, assess and monitor their progress and impact.
- Policy recommendations report (upcoming)
- CATALISI [Community of Practice](#)

### Accelerate Future HEI:

- A **structured acceleration methodology and tools** ([as described in D3.2](#)), including standardised templates for Institutional Transformation Acceleration Projects (ITAPs). These methodological assets form a coherent and transferable framework supporting HEIs in advancing entrepreneurial and innovative capacities.
- Early **implementation results from the nine ITAPs** ([as described in D4.1](#)), which constitute the core pilot activities of the project. All participating HEIs have defined and activated their ITAPs, generating initial insights into institutional barriers, opportunities and emerging practices in transformation. These early findings provide valuable examples of how HEIs operationalise change and design context-specific development pathways.
- A **monitoring and evaluation methodology** ([as described in D6.1](#)), comprising guidance for KPI definition, progress tracking and impact-capturing workshops. This framework provides a structured approach to assessing institutional transformation and can inform wider practices across ERA-aligned initiatives.

### aUPaEU

In collaborative environments (such as European University alliances), widespread adoption of Agora across partner HEIs greatly facilitates coordination and integration of acceleration services. Rather than each institution relying on separate, non-interoperable systems, a shared Agora-based approach reduces friction and significantly enhances collaboration. By using Agora, HEIs can implement their digital transformation while simultaneously generating the metrics required to monitor and assess progress. Key outputs include:

- Ready-to-use Minimum Viable Solution of Agora platform (ML5.1)
- 15 Agoras deployed for diverse university alliances: [Unite!](#); [CIVIS](#); [EU GREEN Test -> EU GREEN](#); [FORTHEM](#); [ENLIGHT](#); [Cirele U.](#); [Uninovis](#); [Pioneer](#); [HEROES](#); [EULiST](#); [EU Conexus](#); [EUDRES](#); [Arqus](#); [EUTOPIA](#); [CIVICA](#)
- 20 signed Agora User Agreements with HEIs

- [Agora Users Agreement](#) – to be signed by the legal representative of the alliance, or in the case of higher education institutions, the rector or equivalent.
- [Agora Legal Notice](#) – outlines the terms of service and privacy policy for the Agora platform, which users accept upon accessing the platform.
- [FAQ \(Frequently Asked Questions about the Agora Agreement\)](#) – clarifies common queries and concerns.
- [Instructions for Completing and Signing the Agora User Agreement](#) – a step-by-step guide to help you complete and sign the agreement efficiently.
- First version of the Acceleration Services Portfolio: Research infrastructures, Course Catalogue, R&I Proposals, Internships, Events, Forum Collaboration, Blog of the Alliance, Stakeholder Management.
- Technical infrastructure and sustainability roadmap ([D3.1](#) Report on available data sources, recommendations, schema of access rights for users and [D5.1](#) Report on the implementation gap analysis and the ideation of the digital transition).
- Conceptualization of the Open Agora: Metagora

#### Joint project outputs:

- Joint [Policy Briefs](#)
- Joint Workshops & Dissemination Events and materials

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

### 7. *Joint and complementary projects' objectives and methodology after three years of implementation.*

After three years of implementation, CATALISI, Accelerate Future HEI, and aUPaEU have jointly contributed to advancing the objectives of ERA Action 13, by supporting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in undertaking institutional transformation aligned with ERA priorities through the design, testing and implementation of acceleration services. While each project pursued specific objectives and operated at different institutional levels, they shared a common overarching goal: to strengthen the capacity of HEIs to modernise their structures, processes and governance models, enabling them to better integrate research, education, innovation and societal engagement within the European Research Area.

Collectively, the three projects aimed to:

- Support HEIs in designing and implementing institutional transformation pathways aligned with ERA priorities such as Open Science, research assessment reform, research careers, talent circulation, digital transformation and knowledge valorisation.
- Test and operationalise acceleration services as practical instruments to enable and accelerate institutional change.
- Strengthen institutional capacity, leadership engagement, and internal coordination for managing complex transformation processes.
- Foster peer learning, mutual learning and cooperation across HEIs and European University alliances.
- Generate evidence-based insights and policy recommendations to inform the future ERA policy development.

The three projects addressed these objectives through complementary approaches:

- **CATALISI** focused on deep institutional transformation at the level of individual HEIs, supporting universities in identifying their needs and intervention areas and co-designing tailored transformation pathways. By focusing on three key domains — research careers and talent support; research modus operandi; and sustainable research & education - and through the design and adoption of seven targeted acceleration services (Living Labs, Design Labs, Counselling, skills-foresight studies, Community of Practice, Marketplace, capacity-building) CATALISI enabled HEIs to address institutional change processes. Through continuous monitoring and assessment, CATALISI tracked progress and drew recommendations to support sustainable change across European universities.
- **Accelerate Future HEI** targeted the transformation of HEIs into more entrepreneurial, innovative and future-oriented institutions, with a strong emphasis on structural and cultural change. Its methodology

centred on the co-design of acceleration services together with practitioner partners and HEIs, followed by testing these services in real institutional contexts through training, peer learning, coaching and capacity-building activities. By aligning its work with broader European agendas, including research assessment reform, Open Science and digitalisation, Accelerate Future HEI generated lessons learned and policy feedback aimed at supporting wider system-level change across European HEIs.

- **aUPaEU** complemented these institution-focused approaches by operating primarily at Universities Alliance level, through the development of a shared digital infrastructure: the Agora platform. Conceived as an open-source tool, Agora provides a collaborative space where HEIs, alliances and stakeholders can access and contribute acceleration services, share knowledge, and coordinate R&I transformation efforts. By lowering entry barriers, particularly for HEIs in widening countries, aUPaEU reduces the need for each institution to develop bespoke systems independently. The project's community-driven methodology fosters exchange, co-creation and resource sharing, promoting Open Science, inclusion, gender equality and systemic institutional change, while ensuring interoperability, sustainability and cross-institutional impact.

## PROJECT IDENTITIES

<b>PROJECT NAMES</b>	<p>Catalysation of institutional transformations of Higher Education Institutions through the adoption of acceleration services (CATALISI)</p> <p>Entrepreneurial &amp; Innovative Universities Acceleration Programme (Accelerate_FutureHEI)</p> <p>A University Partnership for Acceleration of European Universities (aUPaEU)</p>
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-Politecnico di Torino – POLITO –Torino, Italy  
-Universitat Politecnica de Catalunya – UPC - Barcelona, Spain  
-Uniwersytet Im. Adama Mickiewicza W Poznaniu – AMU – Poznan, Poland

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#### FUNDING SCHEME

Programme(s)  
HORIZON.4.2 - Reforming and enhancing the European R&I System  
HORIZON.4.2.6 - Careers and universities

Topic(s)  
HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-51 - Acceleration Services in support of the institutional transformation of Higher Education Institutions

Call for proposal  
HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01

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#### DURATION

CATALISI: January 2023 – December 2025 (36 months)  
Accelerate Future HEI: January 2023 – December 2026 (48 months)  
aUPaEU: January 2023 – December 2027 (60 months)

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#### BUDGET

CATALISI: EU contribution : 3 219 156.25 €  
Accelerate Future HEI EU contribution: 3 197 063 75 €  
aUPaEU: EU contribution : 3 477 625.00 €

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#### WEBSITE

<https://catalisi.eu/>  
<https://acceleratefuturehei.eu/>  
<https://aupaeu.widening.eu/>

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#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

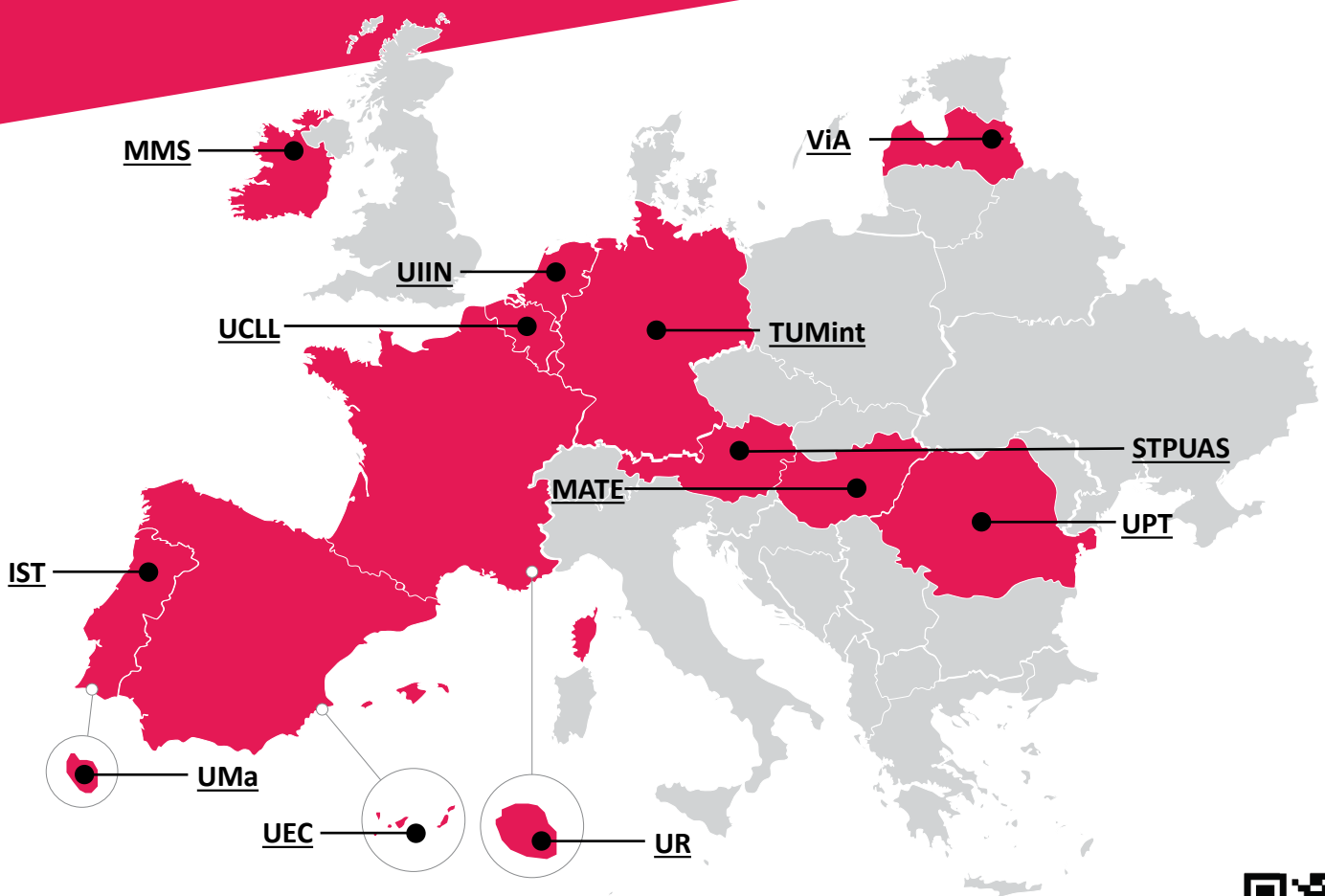
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This project(s) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No CATALISI [101094917], Accelerate\_FutureHEI [101095083], aUPaEU [101095314]

*This policy brief reflects only the author's view and the European Commission/REA is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.*



Follow our journey

To learn more visit the project [www.acceleratefuturehei.eu](http://www.acceleratefuturehei.eu)



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