U!REKA
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

Proposal for Horizon Europe and ECF amendments

13th March, 2026

U!REKA European University alliance will propose amendments to the following EU regulations over Horizon Europe and European Competitiveness Fund as significant funding programmes within the EU's next multiannual financial framework (2028-2034).

- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Horizon Europe, the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, for the period 2028-2034

  Link: EUR-Lex - 52025PC0543 - EN - EUR-Lex

- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF)

  Link: EUR-Lex - 52025PC0555 - EN - EUR-Lex

U!REKA European University in brief

At U!REKA European University we are 11 Applied Universities all over Europe. Together we empower future generations through cross-border collaboration in higher education, research and innovation. By uniting diverse expertise across Europe, we educate inclusive, forward-thinking professionals equipped to lead the transition to climate-neutral, smart, and sustainable cities. Our joint R&I activities with regional innovation ecosystems contribute to the competitiveness and innovativeness of our regions and Europe as a whole.

Our key messages for Horizon Europe program (2028-2034)

- The collaborative R&I activities under Pillar II are critical for Europe's competitiveness, strategic autonomy and wellbeing. A sufficiently strong and protected budget for Pillar II is essential to achieve these aims.
- As the Competitiveness component of Pillar II will align with the four ECF policy windows, the interdisciplinary and societal dimensions of R&I must be safeguarded. Industrial and technological priorities should remain grounded in societal and regional needs to ensure uptake and impact.
- We underline the importance of the proposed "Society" section in the Pillar II, as the proposed R&I topics can greatly contribute to social innovation, resilience and societal wellbeing. We appreciate that this section remains independent from the strategic steering of the European Competitiveness Fund and call for increased budget allocation for it in the MFF
- We support continued R&I funding for the EU Missions and the New European Bauhaus (NEB) under the "Society" section of Pillar II. Particularly in the case of

the Cities Mission & NEB Facility, further R&I funding could bring added value in the field of social dimension of sustainable development, enhancing wellbeing of citizens, countering social segregation, dispelling misinformation & strengthening urban resilience. Extending Mission calls beyond 2030 is necessary to support EU regions and cities' achieving climate, mobility and inclusion timelines.

- The quadruple-helix approach should be reinforced within the Horizon Europe collaborative projects (Pillar II). Partners such as universities of applied sciences, cities and SMEs can greatly contribute to the societal and regional impact of the collaborative R&I projects. Strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration between academia, industry and societal actors will accelerate the translation of research results into practical innovations.
- European University alliances should be fully recognised under Pillar IV as strategic drivers to the ERA objectives, by fostering research careers and researcher mobility, enhancing knowledge valorisation capacities and reinforcing EU R&I ecosystems. The alliances are in a good position to strengthen the interconnections between education, research & innovation, fostering synergies between the European Education Area and the European Research Area.

Our proposed Horizon Europe amendments are in line with those proposals from ERRIN.

Draft Horizon Europe regulation	**Amendment**	**Amendment rationale**
[15] Collaborative research Collaborative research shall support the creation of transnational research and innovation cooperation networks, bringing together entities of different disciplines, to support the development and swift diffusion of high-quality results in favour of the Union's industrial competitiveness, space, security, clean transition, preparedness and resilience, and addressing societal challenges, including culture and creativity, and to strengthen the impact of research in developing and supporting Union policies.	[15] Collaborative research Collaborative research, **both basic and applied research**, shall support the creation of transnational research and innovation cooperation networks l**ike European University alliances**, bringing together entities of different disciplines, to support the development and swift diffusion of high-quality results in favour of the Union's industrial competitiveness, space, security, clean transition, preparedness and resilience, and addressing societal challenges, including culture and creativity, and to strengthen the impact of research in developing and supporting Union policies.	Collaborative research involves all stakeholders from universities to public authorities and businesses, which enhances the quality and excellence of basic and applied research.
[15] Widening participation and spreading excellence The Specific Programme shall support a truly integrated and cohesive R&I	[15] Widening participation and spreading excellence The Specific Programme shall support a truly integrated and cohesive R&I	European University alliances are systemic and structural collaboration platforms rooted in regional innovation

ecosystem in the Union, addressing especially the third and fourth priority areas of the Pact for R&I, amplifying access to research and innovation excellence across the Union and prioritising investments and reforms. Disparities between leading and less advanced countries in terms of R&I performance shall be tackled through activities building a solid science base and connecting actors and ecosystems, and that encourage structural policy reforms at national and regional level aimed at, such as, improving the attractiveness of research careers, internationalisation, effectiveness of management and governance of R&I institutions or matching activities with Union initiatives.	ecosystem in the Union, ~~addressing~~ **recognizing the key role of European University Alliances or similar transnational networks of higher education institutions in implementing ERA policy objectives. This is to** address especially the third and fourth priority areas of the Pact for R&I, amplifying access to research and innovation excellence across the Union and prioritising investments and reforms. Disparities between leading and less advanced countries in terms of R&I performance shall be tackled through activities building a solid science base and connecting actors and ecosystems, and that encourage structural policy reforms at national and regional level aimed at, such as, improving the attractiveness of research careers, internationalisation, effectiveness of management and governance of R&I institutions or matching activities with Union initiatives.	ecosystems that have the necessary means to implement ERA policy objectives in practice all over Europe, to tackle the disparities in R&I performance through Pilar 4.
Article 17 - Innovation Ecosystems - paragraph 2 The Programme shall support activities to foster the integration of the knowledge triangle – higher education, research and innovation, and business – across the Union.	Article 17 - Innovation Ecosystems - paragraph 2 The Programme shall support activities to foster the integration of the knowledge triangle – higher education, research and innovation, and business – across the Union, **including through the activities funded under [EIT Regulation]**. **Synergies will be considered with other European initiatives such as the European University alliances, which provide cross-border frameworks for knowledge-triangle cooperation, strengthening innovation capacity across the Union.**	Deep collaboration between EIT and European University alliances is needed to foster European innovation ecosystems in Pilar 3.

Our key messages for ECF program (2028-2034)

- A balanced representation of academia and industry is needed when drafting the ECF work programmes to enhance synergies between Horizon Europe and ECF, particularly concerning the successful implementation of the “investment journey” from collaborative research activities into market deployment.
- The perspectives of the entire R&I community, including universities of applied sciences, must be consulted in the drafting and selection of the collaborative R&I call topics in the ECF work programmes.
- The ECF work programmes should embrace the quadruple helix approach, supporting start-ups and scale-ups alongside large industrial actors, & recognise both market-driven innovation and non-technological innovation.

- We welcome the ECF's emphasis on skills development as an essential response to address labour shortages in strategic key sectors impacted by the green and digital transition. We recommend that the future ECF funding opportunities will be designed with strong synergies with Erasmus+ and the Pact of Skills
- Upskilling and reskilling pathways should be flexible, labour-market driven and tightly aligned with local and regional ecosystems, enabling Europe to retain and attract needed skills.
- ECF support on skills development should foster collaborative partnerships where the HEIs and other training providers can engage in impactful cooperation with the labour market to develop strategic understanding of the emerging skills needs & find solutions to best address them together at a European scale.
- European University alliances are well aligned to tap into the skills dimension of the ECF. Complementary ECF funding calls for the alliances could meaningfully drive their engagement with local innovation ecosystems & civil society to foster entrepreneurship, develop alternative pathways for upskilling and reskilling and boost the employability of their graduates.

Our proposed ECF amendments in line with ERRIN.

Draft ECF regulation	Amendment	Amendment rationale
New recital – Societal transformation	(xx) new **Competitiveness should be understood as the Union's capacity to generate sustainable growth, resilience and strategic autonomy through technological, social and societal transformation. This requires strengthening territorial innovation ecosystems where public authorities, knowledge institutions – including universities of applied sciences and vocational education and training providers – businesses, investors and citizens co-create, test and deploy innovative solutions. To strengthen the Union's competitiveness, support under the European Competitiveness Fund should contribute to the deployment, scaling up and market uptake of challenge-driven solutions, in complementarity with the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.**	The ECF can complement FP10 (Horizon Europe) by focusing on deployment, scale-up and market uptake of challenge-driven solutions, ensuring continuity from research to implementation and territorial impact.
[5] This also requires that Union funding facilitates the creation and expansion of innovative and industrial ecosystems, where different actors interact in a synergetic way. Successful ecosystems feature intensive and agile interactions and collaboration between small and large companies, universities research institutions, infrastructure providers,	This also requires that Union funding facilitates the creation and expansion of innovative and industrial ecosystems, where different actors interact in a synergetic way. Successful ecosystems feature intensive and agile interactions and collaboration between small and large companies, universities, research institutions, infrastructure	Higher Education Institutions and particularly European University alliances should be recognised as central facilitators of collaboration within innovation ecosystems, bringing together

investors as well as public authorities. Without such collaborations within and between individual innovation and industrial ecosystems, innovation potential stays unexploited.	providers, investors as well as public authorities. Without such collaborations within and between individual innovation and industrial ecosystems **across Europe, supported by European University Alliances**, innovation potential stays unexploited. **Following pilot activities under the European Innovation Ecosystems action in Horizon Europe, support will be provided on deployment and scaling up of connections between place-based ecosystems across value chains and common challenges.**	research organisations, SMEs, investors, public authorities and citizens.
[21] The competitive strength of the Union lies in its people. The Competitiveness Compass identifies promoting skills and quality jobs as a horizontal enabler. The European Council Conclusions highlight that "following the Commission communication of 5 March 2025 on a Union of Skills, further efforts should be made to enhance the acquisition, recognition and retention of skills across the EU, from the building of basic skills to engaging in life-long learning, reskilling and upskilling, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan". A strong dialogue is part of this. Human capital is key to the prosperity of the Union, its economic resilience and unique social market economy. It is essential to foster prosperity, including high quality jobs, by boosting productivity growth, making Union industries more competitive and innovative, attracting additional investments, and supporting a dynamic single market and enhanced economic security. The ECF should contribute to the Union of Skills by supporting the development of a skilled workforce equipped with the specific skills needed in the strategic investment areas of the Fund, through life-long learning, education, training projects and apprenticeships, and the creation of attractive quality jobs accessible to all and by accompanying ECF investments with skills investment to alleviate skills shortages in the given strategic sector of the ECF and indicate when it is included. This includes a Skills Guarantee that should enable workers in sectors undergoing restructuring to upskill and reskill, in line with relevant national, regional and/or sectoral transition strategies. The ECF should support skills intelligence, upskilling and reskilling, and foster public-private partnerships between universities, VET providers, businesses, in particular SMEs, social partners and applied research institutes.	[21] … The ECF **should** support activities of European University Alliances, also in cooperation with employers, to improve their delivery on innovation and the development of skills and talent. **This would accelerate the upscaling of innovation and learning across Europe based on a systemic and structural long-term collaboration model of European University alliances with their regional stakeholders across Europe.**	The amendment highlights the benefits and impact of the ECF support towards the European University alliances. They have established necessary collaborative structures to spread knowledge and innovation across Europe, between universities, businesses, investors, public sector and citizens.

The ECF could also support activities of University Alliances, also in cooperation with employers, to improve their delivery on innovation and the development of skills and talent.		
[79] However, access to finance is an important barrier for SMEs, especially for start-ups and scale-ups, as they often rely on external financing to support their growth plans. SMEs face further barriers to innovation and growth that do not affect larger firms to the same extent, for example the lack of entrepreneurial skills, lack of access technology infrastructure, difficulties in protecting intellectual property or accessing export markets and value chains in order to develop their internationalisation activities.	[79] However, access to finance is an important barrier for SMEs, especially for start-ups and scale-ups, as they often rely on external financing to support their growth plans. SMEs face further barriers to innovation and growth that do not affect larger firms to the same extent, for example the lack of entrepreneurial skills, lack of access technology infrastructure, difficulties in protecting intellectual property or accessing export markets and value chains in order to develop their internationalisation activities. **European University alliances and applied universities are key actors to support SMEs to develop entrepreneurial skills and R&I capabilities at large. They can bring multidisciplinary R&I capacity to SMEs – including human behaviour insights, end-user driven approaches and practice-based, high-impact innovation supporting both SMEs and the public sector. Furthermore, they provide SMEs access to research and technology infrastructures that enable testing, piloting and developing new solutions.**	Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the economy in Europe, with almost two-thirds of employees in the EU working for a SME, producing over half of all value added in the European economy. SMEs are key drivers of innovation and growth, yet many lack internal RDI capacity, which is why the European University alliances and applied universities have a key role in bringing this to them.