



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



THE FUTURE OF ERA HUBS

Recommendations at the end of the project

May 2025

The policy brief aims to discuss the future avenue of the ERA Hubs as a policy concept that is focused on a place-based, ecosystem-driven approach. The COOPERATE project, a Horizon Europe WIDERA project, defines the ERA Hubs concept as **an ecosystem of quadruple helix actors, led by universities, aiming at improving knowledge valorisation within their region**. The ERA Hubs operate within their broader regional Research & Innovation (R&I) ecosystems, which constitute the background conditions for knowledge valorisation.

The ERA Hub ecosystem of actors would come together through a **structured collaboration mechanism**, whereby a group of individuals representing quadruple (or at least triple) helix actors have regular meetings centred on knowledge valorisation. The objective of these meetings would be to discuss, align and decide on the ecosystem's needs and priorities, activities and action plans, inter-hub exchanges and fostering cocreation on knowledge valorisation¹ topics. Such a **flexible and light collaboration mechanism** would be adaptable to diverse types of ecosystems while avoiding the creation of new entities or organisations.

The action would be **led by universities (or university-related entities)**, as these organisations are well-rooted in their regions and are key actors in the creation of knowledge and talent. The university's role within the ERA Hubs is to lead the organisation of these meetings, but participants from the **quadruple helix would take the leadership** on areas that are closer to their core activities.

For more information please contact: <https://www.cooperate-project.eu/>

ERA HUBS CAN ADDRESS THE NEED TO CONNECT EXCELLENT RESEARCH WITH USERS AND SOCIETAL NEEDS

- ❖ **Connecting with all relevant stakeholders and involving the whole R&I ecosystem is a key prerequisite for a flourishing knowledge valorisation process**, together with the promotion of an open entrepreneurial culture, better circulation and co-creation of knowledge, mobility of skilled people, and breaking functional and physical silos. The latest version of the Proposal for

¹ By taking a regional ecosystem lens, this approach to ERA Hubs would complement the recent actions developed at EU level in the field of knowledge valorisation (e.g. ERA Action 7, the EC Knowledge Valorisation Platform, the Guiding Principles, the Codes of Practice, the Mutual Learning Exercise, etc.).

a Council Recommendation on the European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027 highlights the need to improve “*the articulation between R&I and higher education within the ERA and unleashing the full potential of European R&I ecosystems*”. This point is underlined as a structural policy for the upcoming ERA Policy Agenda.

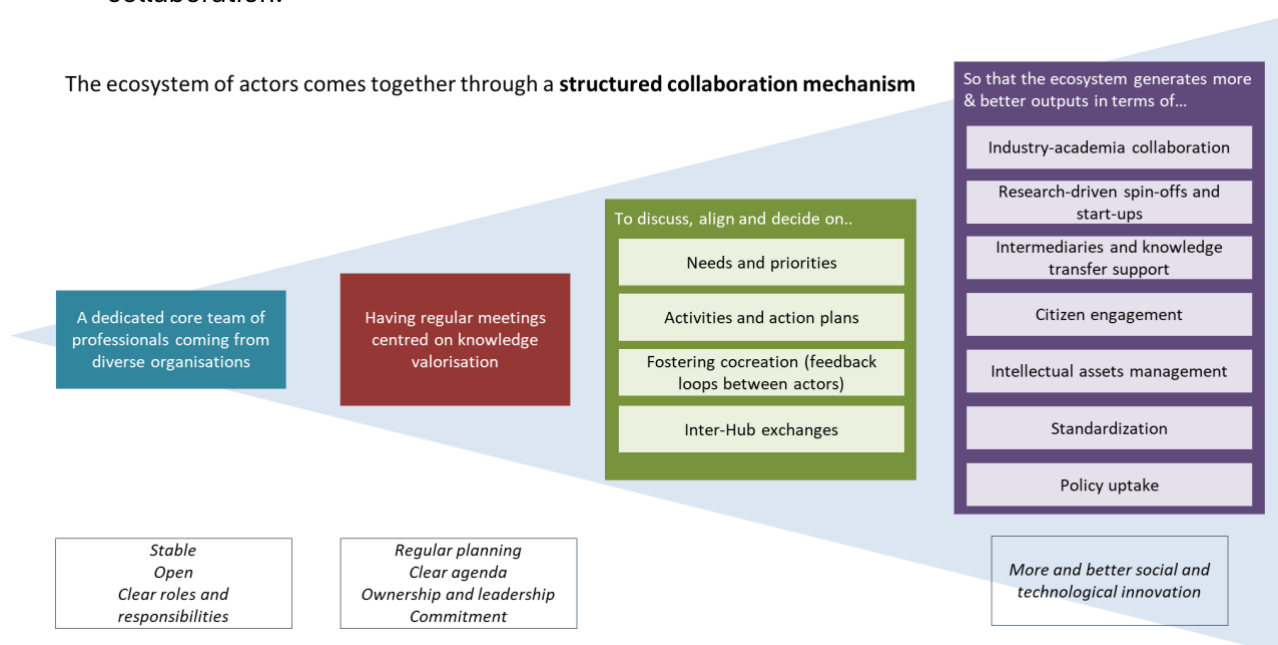
- ❖ **There is a gap in policy attention and action towards fostering knowledge valorisation at the regional level**, even though this is the level where connections and trust are easier to develop, where value and knowledge are created, and where individuals are trained and employed.
- ❖ **Universities, as creators of knowledge and talent are in an excellent position to fulfil the role of orchestrators of their regional R&I ecosystems**. Universities are well-rooted in the territory, perceived as neutral actors and have the key to unlock a more fluid and effective communication between knowledge producers (researchers) and knowledge users (business, public sector and civil society). Universities can thus implement a shift to a broader approach to knowledge valorisation and help to connect networks and improve collaborations within and between regions.

PROJECT RESULTS

The figure below summarises the operationalisation of the ERA Hubs as collaboration mechanism, defined in the COOPERATE project. To accommodate the implementation and deployment of this collaboration mechanism, the project has developed several tools:

- A **SELF-ASSESSMENT tool** to measure the maturity of regional R&I ecosystems, allowing them to benchmark themselves with other R&I ecosystems and to identify their own strengths and gaps.
- A **PLAYBOOK** with the roadmap and model for knowledge valorisation at regional level.
- A **prototype of the EU PLATFORM** that could serve to connect the regional ecosystems to inspire each other on topics related to knowledge valorisation and to foster interregional collaboration.

The ecosystem of actors comes together through a **structured collaboration mechanism**



Source: COOPERATE project

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Draghi (2024) and Letta (2024) reports² both mentioned the need to refocus the EU's collective efforts to close the innovation gap and unlock Europe's innovation potential, while the 2024 ERA Communication stressed the need to further strengthen and better connect the R&I ecosystems of all European countries and regions. Although there is a clear need to connect and stimulate regional R&I ecosystems, ERA action 15 "Build up regional R&I ecosystems to improve excellence and competitiveness" has not been endorsed for implementation. Different activities within the COOPERATE project have pointed at the need and the possibility to make the concept more operative and effective by further defining its scope of action, and more concretely to bring knowledge valorisation to the core of ERA Hubs concept. **We therefore recommend to connect the insights obtained from developing the concept of ERA Hubs to the ERA Action 7 "Upgrade EU guidance for a better knowledge valorisation".**

We see universities (or university-related entities) as creators of knowledge and talent, able to fulfil the role of orchestrators of their regional R&I ecosystems. Universities contribute to this ecosystem approach as centres of knowledge production, collaboration, and coordination. Initially working within triple-helix relationships involving academia, industry, and government, universities now often include civil society, emerging to a "fourth-generation university," where universities function as regional innovation hubs connected with industry, government, and communities³. **Fourth-generation universities** contribute to the advancement of learning, training, and development opportunities by promoting the generation of globally impactful research and innovation; and by facilitating the valorisation of knowledge, talent, and best practices. They foster a structured collaboration mechanism between universities and all relevant stakeholders from the quadruple helix in their regions.

We recommend developing regional knowledge valorisation roadmaps to enhance knowledge valorisation outcomes. These roadmaps should establish the regional R&I priorities and gather the stakeholders around a structured collaboration mechanism, while also contributing to the design of tailored and actionable regional and national policy plans. By establishing better connections between the actors of the regional ecosystem around knowledge valorisation, there will be increased opportunities to match the knowledge offer with the user demand, as well as with the required expertise and infrastructure needed to develop innovative solutions and products (within the regional ecosystem or beyond).

We recommend setting up adequate governance systems to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of a collaboration mechanism across actors that can facilitate the long-term stability of the collaboration mechanism. It should include a network of professionals and organisations with a deep connection with the regional stakeholders on matters related to knowledge valorisation. In addition, by **connecting regional R&I ecosystems** with different levels of maturity and development, the less advanced ecosystems will benefit from exposure to the tools, approaches and methodologies applied in more advanced ecosystems, hence fostering their application. This can contribute to optimising investments made through other EU policies like Cohesion policy.

PROJECT IDENTITIES

PROJECT NAMES

COOrdinating and Piloting actions towards ERA-hubs as inTer- and intraregional Ecosystems for knowledge production – COOPERATE

² Draghi, M. (2024). *The future of European competitiveness*: Report by Mario Draghi. Brussels: European Commission; Letta, E. (2024). *Much more than a market: Utilizing the full potential of the Single Market as a driver of Europe's competitive sustainability, digital leadership and resilience*. Report prepared at the request of the President of the European Commission. European Commission, Brussels.

³ Bogers, M. L., & Steinbuch, M. (2023). De vierde generatie universiteit: het nieuwe tijdperk van open innovatie en ecosysteemdenken. *Holland management review*, (208), 63-71.

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