

13. Action 13: Empower Higher Education Institutions

1.1. Purpose of the Action and expected outcomes

Action 13 acknowledges the role of European universities in driving the green and digital transition and aims at empowering them to take an active role on this front. Through its focus on higher education, Action 13 is strongly interrelated with the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025. The action seeks to offer new ways for universities and researchers to work, cooperate and innovate across borders, and aims at ensuring Europe's role and competitiveness on the global stage in research and innovation.

As outlined in the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024, Action 13 revolves around three core outcomes:¹

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

The ERA Forum subgroup decided to focus on the third objective given that the first and second objectives are largely tackled by other ERA Actions (in particular Actions 1 and 4).

1.2. Implementation of the Action

For the implementation of ERA Action 13 the ERA Forum Subgroup 'Universities for ERA' has been established. This subgroup met twice between March and May 2023. The second meeting discussed avenues for a better coordination between the Member States and the EU level to raise excellence in (networks of) universities and support trailblazer (networks of) institutions. Additionally, a break-out session was devoted to discussing an action plan. The most feasible and relevant actions, on the short (2025), medium (2026-2027), and long term (>2027), as well as fostering synergies with education and alignment with EU, national and regional policies were reviewed.

In its **2022 Communication on a European strategy for universities**, the European Commission sets out its plans to support and enable universities to adapt to changing conditions, to thrive and to contribute to Europe's resilience and recovery.² In order to equip researchers with the skills needed for a career within and outside of academia, in 2023 the European Commission tabled a Council Recommendation on a 'European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe'.

The Commission has identified universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions. The Commission has set up a structured dialogue with Member States on digital education and skills to agree jointly on the key enabling factors to make digital education and training effective and inclusive. The **Digital Europe Programme** and the **Erasmus+ Jean Monnet activities** provide support to enhance and recognise the efforts of universities driving the digital transformation.

One of the initiatives of the Communication is the **Erasmus+ European Universities Initiative**. Horizon Europe, Digital Europe and other EU and national instruments will join efforts to support transnational alliances of higher education institutions to develop and share a common long-term structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research and innovation, creating European campuses involving various universities where students, staff and researchers from all parts of Europe can enjoy seamless mobility and create new knowledge together, across countries and disciplines.³

¹ European Commission (2021), European Research Area Policy Agenda – Overview of actions for the period 2022-2024, p. 6.

² <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-communication-on-a-european-strategy-for-universities?>

³ Ibid.

Within the Horizon Europe programme, the EU supports selected universities in the framework of the **European Excellence Initiative** to raise excellence in science and in value creation through deeper and geographically inclusive cooperation within alliances of higher education institutions. The European Excellence Initiative also aims at improving global competitiveness and visibility of Europe's higher education institutions, creating critical mass in key areas such as the green transition and Horizon Europe mission areas. Within calls published in 2022 and 2023, about EUR 70 million have been attributed to Higher Education Institutions under the Horizon WIDERA call.

The European Excellence Initiative is also connected to the **European Universities Alliances** selected under Erasmus+. As part of the 2022 Communication on a European strategy for universities, the European Universities Initiative is an initiative linking universities across the EU and the Neighbourhood to increase the quality of higher education. Following the 2022 Erasmus+ call for proposals, there are 44 European alliances which include approximately 340 higher education institutions in 31 countries.

This includes the EU Member States, as well as Iceland, Norway, Serbia, and Turkey. There are also approximately 1,300 associated partners from non-governmental organisations, enterprises, cities, local and regional authorities. One of the alliances focuses on the digital transition of universities (European Digital UniverCity), which is one of the main objectives of Action 13.⁴

The **Digital Education Action Plan** (2021-2027) is a renewed EU policy initiative that was published in September 2020. It proposes a way forward to achieve a high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe. Its key objectives are to support the digital transformation of the education and training systems in the Member States. Action 5 of the plan is particularly relevant for the ERA Action 13, as it concerns developing digital transformation plans for education and training institutions, including universities. The ERASMUS+ programme provides funding for cooperation projects that support the digital transformation planning of education and training institutions.⁵

EURAXESS - Researchers in Motion supports researchers and innovators in their careers through a range of job offers, funding opportunities and free assistance in situations such as moving to other countries for work opportunities. It includes information, tools, and resources aimed to support career planning. National, regional, and local bodies act as EURAXESS centres that provide advice to researchers about their professional development.⁶

In the context of policies related to Action 13, the 2023 OECD STIP Survey provides information on **budget**, Figure 32 shows that the funds allocated to policies strengthening ERA Action 13 are relatively high, but most policies are in the range between EUR 1M and 5M EUR, with the fewest policies receiving a high volume of funding (over EUR 500M). An example of the latter is the University Performance Agreements⁷ in Austria.

⁴ <https://educalliance.eu>

⁵ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

⁶ <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/career-development>

⁷ 'Performance agreements', Austria Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research website, available at: <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/HS-Uni/Hochschulgovernance/Steuerungsinstrumente/Leistungsvereinbarungen.html>

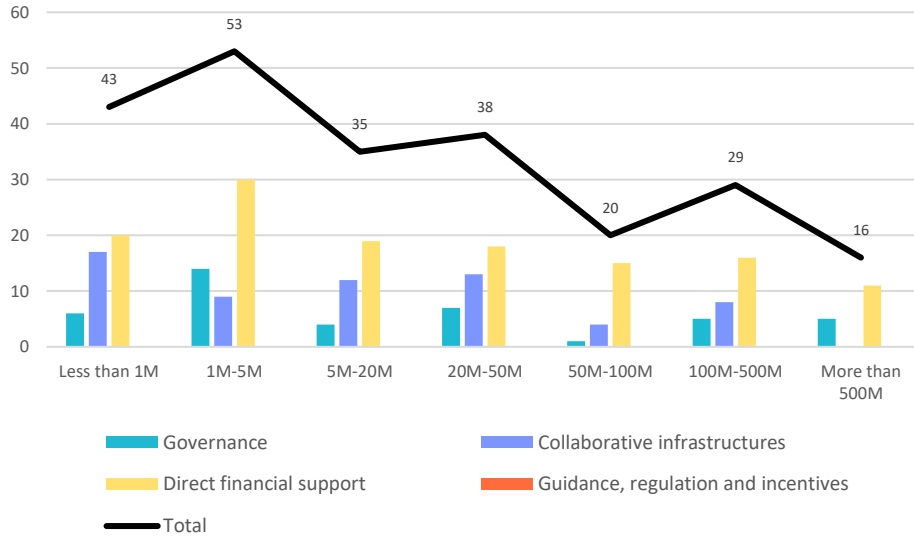


Figure 1: Action 13: Distribution of budget per policy instrument

The **policy instruments** related to Action 13 which are implemented across the Member States and at EU level fall mostly into three categories: direct financial support (49%), governance (24%) and collaborative infrastructures (26%), while guidance, regulation and incentives only account for 1% of the policies.