



1-2 June 2026

Higher Education Institutions as ecosystem anchors: strengthening regional R&I systems for Europe's competitiveness and prosperity

ERA Structural Policy Workshop

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About the organisers

European Commission, DG RTD: The Directorate-General Research and Innovation (DG RTD) develops and carries out the Commission's policies on research and innovation. It is also the Commission's lead service coordinating and facilitating the ERA Policy Agenda.

Coimbra Group: Founded in 1985 and formally constituted by Charter in 1987, the Coimbra Group is an association of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities of high international standard committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote, for the benefits of its members, internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society. It is also the purpose of the Group to influence European education and research policy and to develop best practice through the mutual exchange of experience.

ERRIN: The European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN) is a well-known Brussels-based platform that gathers around 120 regional organisations from more than 20 European countries. Established in 2001, ERRIN supports members to enhance their regional and local research and innovation capacities and further develop their R&I ecosystems. The network maintains a long-standing relationship with the EU institutions and other organisations to strengthen the regional and local dimension in EU Research and Innovation policy and programmes.

EURASHE: EURASHE was founded in 1990 to advance and advocate for Applied Higher Education across Europe. Today, the association represents around 100 members, including Universities of Applied Sciences, Polytechnics, University Colleges, and national sector organisations active across the EHEA. EURASHE works to strengthen professionally oriented higher education by promoting applied research, fostering cooperation with industry and regional ecosystems, and supporting internationalisation within its member institutions. Its longstanding role in European policy dialogue, coupled with active Communities of Practice in applied research, quality assurance and skills, positions EURASHE as a reference point for practice oriented and labour-market-relevant higher education.

YERUN - Young European Research Universities Network: Founded in 2015 and based in Brussels, brings together excellence and value-driven young research universities. The network's objective is to strategically represent its members in the decision-making process at EU level, thus shaping their future and promoting their role in European societies. Further to its policy advocacy activity, the network also strengthens cooperation opportunities among its members in areas of mutual interest and raises their visibility via a dedicated communication strategy.

Workshop objectives and structure

The fifth freedom entails embedding research and innovation drivers at the core of the Single Market, thereby fostering an ecosystem where knowledge diffusion propels both economic vitality, societal advancement and cultural enlightenment.

Enrico Letta, Much More Than a Market, April 2024

In his report, Enrico Letta recognises the crucial role of research and innovation for economic, societal and cultural development in the context of the European Single Market. At the same time, Mario Draghi's report identifies why the ambition of a 'fifth freedom' remains unfulfilled: higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to face persistent challenges in connecting more closely with innovation clusters that helps them turning knowledge into economic and societal value.

This workshop takes stock of the tension emerging from these analyses, placing HEIs at the centre of the challenge. They educate future generations, create knowledge, support innovation and contribute to societal and territorial transformation. They are also deeply embedded in their territories.

Across Europe, there are numerous examples of HEIs successfully collaborating with companies, public authorities, investors and civil society. However, research, innovation, education and regional development policies do not always operate as an integrated framework.

Despite European, national and local initiatives supporting collaboration, several structural barriers limit systemic impact. Governance mechanisms and funding streams tend to operate in silos; coordination between EU, national and regional R&I strategies remains weak; academic reward systems still prioritise individual outputs over ecosystem-building efforts; intersectoral mobility and public-private engagement remain undervalued.

Ultimately, regional innovation capacity depends on the quality of relationships between HEIs, companies, public authorities, investors and civil society. Where these actors align around shared priorities, structured governance and consistent, predictable investment streams, ecosystems become self-reinforcing. Where they remain fragmented, innovation is episodic and dependent on temporary, often project-based, funding.

This workshop focuses on the anchoring and orchestrating role of HEIs within regional research and innovation ecosystems. It aims to explore the structural, institutional and governance transformations required for HEIs, industry, public authorities and civil society to overcome fragmentation and enable long-term, systemic cooperation.

In particular, the workshop seeks to:

- Assess the enabling conditions and barriers that affect HEIs and research institutes' ability to structurally integrate their four missions (education, research, innovation and societal engagement) within regional R&I ecosystems.
- Identify institutional frameworks and multi-level governance and funding models that enable durable public-private collaboration.
- Examine how EU and national instruments can better support the long-term development and sustainability of R&I ecosystems.
- Develop concrete policy recommendations to strengthen HEIs' role as leading innovation anchors.

During the first part of the workshop, concrete, evidence-based practices will be presented and discussed, illustrating how HEIs act as ecosystem orchestrators – integrating their four missions, building durable cross-actor partnerships, leveraging policy and funding instruments and delivering measurable impact.

The second half-day will focus on collective work, drawing on the discussed case-studies to generate a set of actionable recommendations for policymakers and institutional leaders. These recommendations will aim at strengthening the systemic role of HEIs within regional innovation ecosystems and improving alignment between European, national and regional instruments.

Programme

Researchers in Europe are less well integrated into innovation 'clusters' – networks of universities, start-ups, large companies and venture capitalists – which account for a large share of successful commercialisation.

Mario Draghi, The Future of European Competitiveness, September 2024

Monday, 1 June Afternoon

- *European Commission, DG RTD, CDMA building, Floor - 01 Room 127, Rue du Champ de Mars 21, 1000 Brussels*

- **14:00 - 14:15: Opening words by the European Commission and the Structural Policy co-sponsors**
- **14:15 - 14:30: Presentation by Ugo Dino Fonda from RTD.A5 'Innovation Policy & Access to Finance'**
- **14:30 - 15:45: Group discussion 1 – Examples of higher education institutions as ecosystem orchestrators/drivers**
 - 14:30 – 14:40: Case study – Focus on 'TECH.LAND – Cross-Border Governance Model for Regional Innovation' (NL & DE)
 - 14:40 – 14:50: Case study – Focus on 'Myllypuro Smart Campus' (FI)
 - 14:50 – 15:00: Case study – Focus on 'Impronta Granada' (ES)
 - 15:00 – 15:30: Q&A and interactive group discussion to identify first recommendations
 - 15:30 – 15:45: Group discussion 1 wrap-up

- **15:45 - 16:15: Coffee break**

- **16:15 - 17:30: Group discussion 2 – Examples of higher education institutions as ecosystem orchestrators/drivers**
 - 16:15 – 16:25: Case study – Focus on 'Newcastle HELIX' (UK)
 - 16:25 – 16:35: Case study – Focus on 'University of Rijeka – Regional Innovation Ecosystem' (HR)
 - 16:35 – 16:45: Case study – Focus on 'Brightlands' (NL)
 - 16:45 – 17:15: Q&A and interactive group discussions to identify recommendations
 - 17:15 – 17:30: Group discussion 2 wrap-up

- **17:45 - 19:15: Standing cocktail reception**
 - *Fondation Universitaire, Rue d'Egmont 11, 1000 Brussels*

Tuesday, 2 June Morning

- European Commission, DG RTD, CDMA building, Floor - 01 Room 127, 21 Rue du Champ de Mars 1000 Brussels

- **08:45 - 09:15: Welcome coffee**
- **09:15 - 09:30: Keynote speech by Mikel Landabaso, Director for Fair and Sustainable Economy at the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission**
- **09:30 - 09:45: Presentation by Mats Brandt, Regional Mayor of Ostrobothnia**
- **09:45 - 11:00: Towards policy recommendations – Session 1: Mapping European R&I ecosystems models: identifying common success factors**

After hearing concrete cases, participants identify key actors, relationships, governance structures and gaps within their national / regional R&I ecosystems.

- 09:45 - 10:30: Discussion in break-out groups
 - 10:30 - 11:00: Presentation of results and debate
- **11:00 - 11:15: Coffee break**
 - **11:15 - 12:15: Towards policy recommendations – Session 2: Co-creation**
Co-creation session addressing aiming to identify concrete policy recommendations to strengthen the role of HEIs and exchange on key points and lessons learned
Topics for discussion:
 - Funding design that supports long-term, structured, cross-actor collaboration
 - Incentive and evaluation reforms
 - Policy alignment across education, research and innovation, and societal engagement
 - Intersectoral mobility
 - Support mechanisms for interdisciplinary and cross-sector engagement
 - **12:15 - 12:30: Conclusion and next steps**

Case studies

Metropolia UAS Myllypuro Smart Campus Ecosystem

Institution: Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Country/scope: Finland — Helsinki Metropolitan area

Funding model: Long-term seed funding, self-investment, and a diverse portfolio of national and international funding sources.

Governance: Steering group (executive board) + operational group led by the Innovation Director, centred on the Smart and Creative City innovation hub.

Overview: Myllypuro Smart Campus Ecosystem is a living lab-based innovation and learning environment located at Metropolia UAS Myllypuro campus in Helsinki, Finland. The ecosystem brings together education, applied research, industry collaboration, and urban development in close cooperation with the City of Helsinki and regional partners. The campus integrates advanced building technologies, automation, artificial intelligence, and cloud-based services into both teaching and real-life experimentation, enabling students, researchers, and companies to co-create practical and scalable solutions. Intelligent and adaptable spaces generate data that supports user-centric design, sustainable development, and the anticipation of future competence and workforce needs. The Smart Campus also contributes actively to the European Research Area through multiple European-funded projects that utilise the campus infrastructure, expertise, and collaborative ecosystem as a platform for innovation, piloting, and international cooperation.

Myllypuro Smart Campus Ecosystem demonstrates how a higher education institution can act as a long-term ecosystem anchor by integrating education, research, innovation, industry collaboration, and urban development into a shared living lab environment. Located at Metropolia UAS in Helsinki, the ecosystem has played a significant role in the regeneration of the Myllypuro district by strengthening local attractiveness, supporting skills development, and fostering sustainable economic activity in eastern Helsinki.

The main objective of the ecosystem is to connect advanced technologies with practical learning, applied research, and real-life experimentation. Through close collaboration with the City of Helsinki and around 40 companies, students from Metropolia and other educational institutions, researchers, and industry partners co-create solutions that address future urban challenges. A concrete example is the campus weather station pilot, where real-time environmental data supports energy optimisation, campus maintenance, research, and teaching, turning data into measurable operational and educational value.

The ecosystem has been supported through a combination of seed funding, self-investment, European funding, and over 15 national and international projects with a combined value exceeding €2.4 million. Its infrastructure has enabled European initiatives such as the Horizon Europe SkillBill project and new degree programmes in construction information technology. Over the past five years, the campus has hosted approximately 3,000 visitors and gained international recognition through awards, peer-reviewed publications, and Smart Building GOLD certification.

Key challenges have included integrating diverse technologies, aligning stakeholders with different objectives, ensuring ethical and effective use of data, and creating scalable yet user-centred learning experiences. Despite these challenges, the ecosystem highlights the broader societal relevance of higher education institutions as drivers of innovation, sustainability, multidisciplinary collaboration, and regional transformation.



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Incubation-Hubs for New Startups, Products and Innovative Research based Enterprises in Baden-Württemberg Hub Plattform - INSPIRE BW Hub Plattform

Institution: Heidelberg University

Country/scope: Regional (Baden-Württemberg, Germany) with strong interregional and European linkages through participation in transnational initiatives and networks.

Funding model: State-funded regional innovation ecosystem model combining long term strategic public funding with project-based support mechanisms for entrepreneurship, research transfer, and startup development

Governance: The initiative is governed through a shared multi-level coordination structure led by Heidelberg University together with six regional hub coordinators and 28 participating higher education institutions collaborating with industry, public sector actors, and civil society

Overview: The INSPIRE BW Hub Plattform is a regional innovation initiative in Baden-Württemberg (Germany) that connects 28 higher education institutions across six coordinated hubs to strengthen entrepreneurship, startup support, and research-based innovation. The platform promotes long-term collaboration between universities, industry, public authorities, and civil society to create an integrated regional innovation ecosystem. Its activities focus on interdisciplinary startup support, entrepreneurial education, innovation transfer, networking, and skills development aligned with regional labour market needs. The initiative also supports thematic innovation clusters in areas such as digitalisation, green transition, and advanced manufacturing through living labs and co-creation formats at the universities. A particular focus is placed on increasing the visibility and participation of women in entrepreneurship and startup leadership. By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange across institutions, the initiative contributes to strengthening Baden-Württemberg's innovation capacity and regional competitiveness.

The INSPIRE BW Hub Plattform is a strategic regional innovation initiative in Baden-Württemberg (Germany) designed to strengthen collaboration between higher education institutions, industry, public authorities, and civil society. Coordinated by Heidelberg University together with six regional hub coordinators, the initiative brings together 28 universities and higher education institutions to create a long-term, integrated innovation ecosystem. Its significance lies in moving beyond isolated, project-based collaboration toward a permanent governance and support structure that embeds entrepreneurship, research transfer, education, and societal engagement into regional development processes.

The main objectives of the initiative are to foster startup creation and research-based entrepreneurship, strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, improve knowledge transfer, and align talent development with labour market and societal needs. Particular emphasis is placed on supporting female entrepreneurship and increasing the visibility of women-led startups and spin-offs. The initiative also promotes innovation in key thematic areas such as digitalisation, green transition, and advanced manufacturing through innovation clusters, living labs, and co-creation platforms.

One of the key challenges has been coordinating a large number of stakeholders with differing institutional priorities, governance structures, and funding expectations. Building long-term trust and ensuring sustainable funding beyond short-term project cycles have also required continuous strategic alignment and cooperation across institutions and sectors.

Despite these challenges, the initiative has generated significant qualitative and quantitative impact. It has strengthened the regional innovation ecosystem, increased startup support activities and interdisciplinary networking opportunities, and improved collaboration between universities and external stakeholders, including SMEs and public sector actors. The platform has also contributed to a stronger culture of entrepreneurship and co-creation within higher education institutions, while reinforcing Baden-Württemberg's profile as an innovation-driven and internationally connected region.



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Smart City Competence Centre (SC3)

Institution: Eesti Ettevõtluskõrgkool Mainor (Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (EUAS)), co-led with AS Mainor (developer of Ülemiste City, Tallinn)

Country/scope: Estonia - Ülemiste City, Tallinn

Funding model: Blended model combining institutional co-investment by EUAS and AS Mainor, contractual B2B services, and competitive public funding channelled through a single service-based architecture.

Governance: Jointly governed by EUAS and AS Mainor as an innovation ecosystem anchor, with structured engagement with the City of Tallinn, the Estonian Ministries of Education and Research and of Economic Affairs and Communications, research partners, and the 400+ companies based in Ülemiste City.

Overview: The Smart City Competence Centre (SC3) is a joint strategic initiative of the Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (EUAS) and AS Mainor, developer of Ülemiste City – the Baltic’s largest smart city. Embedded in an ecosystem of 400+ companies and 18 000 daily users, SC3 operates as a living lab where urban solutions are validated under real operational, regulatory and user conditions. Its service architecture rests on three integrated pillars: talent and future skills; Test City piloting and independent validation; and demand-driven applied research in sustainable entrepreneurship, organisational behaviour, user experience and change management. By bridging the social, organisational, and commercialisation levels at which most urban pilots stall, SC3 closes the development gap between research outputs and adoption-ready urban services.

SC3 is a joint initiative of EUAS and AS Mainor that consolidates a decade of operational RDI cooperation into a single competence centre with a cohesive service portfolio for academia, industry, the City of Tallinn, and national authorities. SC3 demonstrates that applied university, when structurally embedded and co-invested with private partners, can credibly anchor a regional RDI ecosystem.

The portfolio rests on three pillars. Talent & Future Skills runs tailor made curricula, micro-credentials, and a Corporate Academy that meet skill demand of the market and help companies advance their existing staff. Test City offers agile piloting, independent validation and user co-creating in a live urban environment. Applied Research & Knowledge Transfer delivers demand-based research in business models, organisational behaviour, user experience and change management. SC3 does not compete with deep-tech research infrastructures; it complements them by bridging the deployment gap with the competencies needed to bring the solutions to the market.

Completed validations already include autonomous-delivery scaling and staff reskilling with robotics company Clevo, AI-based building management with R8 Technologies, people-flow optimisation with elevator manufacturer KONE, computer-vision validation with Fyma, and a public-sector mobility pilot with the City of Tallinn that produced the evidence base for cycling-infrastructure investment decisions.

The principal challenge is structural: as a private university, EUAS competes on a research-funding market designed around large public universities. SC3 responds with a deliberately blended model that combined institutional co-investment, contractual B2B revenue, and competitive grants.

By reframing the Smart City agenda around human-centric services aligned with the European Green Deal and the New European Bauhaus, SC3 shows in operational form that all four missions of higher education can be integrated through a single institution at a scale realistic for many of Europe's small and mid-sized cities.



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4th Generation University

Institution: Eindhoven University of Technology

Country/scope: The Netherlands, Brainport Eindhoven and beyond

Funding model: The university acts as a neutral ecosystem orchestrator, convening government, industry and society to leverage public funding in support of talent development, research and entrepreneurship for the high-tech ecosystem.

Governance: The university as orchestrator of the innovation ecosystem relies on a novel governance of the ecosystem, in which key actors come together and together formulate actions, needs and strategic planning.

Overview: Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) finds itself at the heart of the high-tech systems and semicon ecosystem of the Netherlands. In the past decade, the university has actively instigated several branches of these ecosystems, adding fields like photonics and mobility technologies. Now that semicon field has become one of the focal points of international economic growth and therefore, of European technological sovereignty, the Eindhoven region is booming with an expected shortage of 50.000 engineers in the coming years. This is why the university focuses on being a gateway for talent as well as on the technological competences that are needed in the ecosystem. TU/e orchestrates the ecosystem not for the profit of industry, but for the competitiveness and resilience of the region, the Netherlands and Europe.

Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) operates at the heart of Brainport Eindhoven, one of Europe's most advanced high-tech innovation ecosystems, where close proximity between academia, industry and entrepreneurship enables talent, research and professional expertise to translate rapidly into global impact. In response to growing expectations from stakeholders, TU/e has embraced the concept of the 4th Generation University, positioning itself as an ecosystem anchor that actively convenes partners, co-develops shared strategies and aligns education, research and innovation with societal and industrial challenges.

This approach reflects a shift from project-based collaboration to long-term, system-level orchestration, where the university acts as a gateway for talent and a driver of mission-oriented transformation.

The initiative focuses on strengthening transdisciplinary education, mission-driven research and deep industry partnerships, while developing joint roadmaps that bridge fundamental research with near-market innovation. Key success factors include the strong strategic focus on ecosystem integration, the high level of interaction between university researchers and industry R&D professionals, and hybrid academic-industry roles that foster knowledge exchange. However, challenges remain in aligning differing time horizons between education, research and innovation processes, and in effectively connecting long-term scientific inquiry with short-term industrial needs.

The impact of this model is both qualitative and quantitative. TU/e retains 60–70% of its international graduates in the region, strengthening the local talent base; around 14% of its academic publications are co-authored with industry, and over 70% of its European Commission-funded projects involve private partners. Moreover, nearly 90% of TU/e spin-offs and 48% of alumni-founded companies remain within the region, demonstrating strong local economic and entrepreneurial impact. Overall, TU/e exemplifies how higher education institutions can function as ecosystem orchestrators, contributing to regional competitiveness, innovation capacity and broader societal transformation.



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Circular InNOVation: Driving University-Industry Collaboration for Circular Economy

Institution: NOVA University Lisbon / Sociedade Ponto Verde

Country/scope: Portugal (national level, with scalability potential at European level)

Funding model: Industry-funded model: fully funded by Sociedade Ponto Verde (SPV), covering all operational, training, and support costs.

Governance: Programme led by NOVA University Lisbon through NOVA Impact, in close collaboration with Sociedade Ponto Verde as the sole industry partner, with engagement across multiple NOVA academic units.

Overview: The Circular InNOVation Programme is an innovation and entrepreneurship initiative led by NOVA University Lisbon, through NOVA Impact, in partnership with Sociedade Ponto Verde (SPV). It mobilises the academic community, i.e., students, researchers, alumni, and professionals, to develop practical, market-oriented solutions addressing packaging waste management and circular economy challenges. Participants form multidisciplinary teams and follow a structured three-stage pipeline: Hackathon and ideation, Development, and Pilot. They receive support through workshops, mentoring, and industry feedback, enabling them to refine solutions from concept to prototype. The programme integrates education, research, innovation, and societal engagement, embedding circular economy principles into entrepreneurial training. Now in its second edition, it operates at national level with strong potential for European replication within University Alliances.

Circular InNOVation exemplifies how a higher education institution can act as an ecosystem orchestrator, connecting academia, industry, and society to address pressing sustainability challenges. Led by NOVA University Lisbon through NOVA Impact, the programme operates in close partnership with Sociedade Ponto Verde (SPV), Portugal's national entity responsible for packaging waste recycling under the extended producer responsibility framework.

The programme's primary objective is to bridge academic knowledge and industry needs by engaging multidisciplinary teams in solving real-world circular economy challenges. SPV co-designs the problem statements, providing direct access to industry data, expertise, and networks. This strong academia-industry alignment is a key success factor, alongside the programme's structured pipeline, from ideation to prototyping, and tailored support through workshops, mentoring, and stakeholder engagement.

As an ecosystem anchor, NOVA University Lisbon leverages fosters entrepreneurial talent and enables knowledge valorisation. The programme spans multiple academic units, promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration and embedding sustainability principles into entrepreneurial education.

Key challenges include: attracting participants with sufficiently diverse expertise, maintaining sustained engagement throughout the programme, aligning academic timelines with industry expectations, and securing long-term scalability for early-stage solutions. Ensuring credible pathways from prototype to market uptake remains an ongoing challenge.

In terms of impact, the programme has strengthened NOVA's innovation culture in sustainability, enhanced participants' problem-solving and teamwork capabilities, and fostered new collaborations between academia and industry. A tangible outcome from a previous edition includes a functional low-cost prototype of a smart recycling bin capable of collecting user data to promote behavioural change and improve recycling efficiency. More broadly, Circular InNOVation has increased circular economy awareness within the academic community and contributed to solutions with real societal relevance and potential for market uptake.



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A multiannual Local Higher Education, Research, and Innovation Scheme at the service of the City and the Citizens: perspectives from the University of Poitiers and its Alliance of European Universities, EC2U

Institution: University of Poitiers

Country/scope: Regional (Poitiers, France, urban area) and transnational (EC2U Alliance)

Funding model: Blended funding model combining universities' own funds, municipalities' own funds, Erasmus+ funding through the European Universities Initiative, and additional FP8/FP9 European research and innovation funding streams.

Governance: Multi-level governance model led by the University of Poitiers and the Grand Poitiers urban community, involving university and municipal partners from the EC2U Alliance of European Universities, alongside local innovation actors, businesses, NGOs, start-up incubators and associated partners across nine European cities.

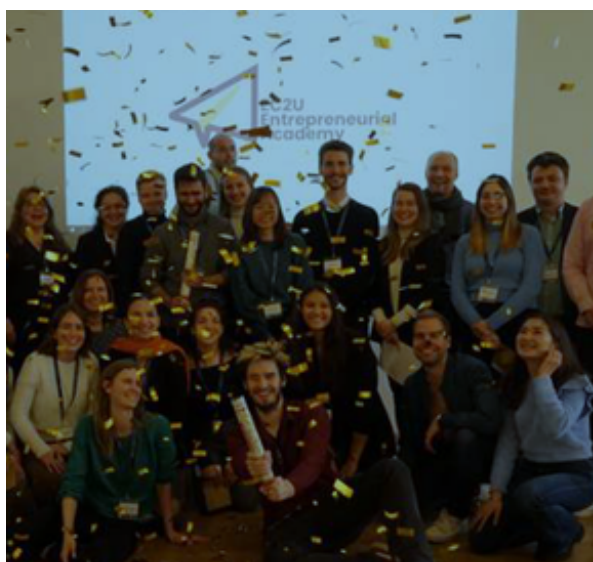
Overview: The initiative combines two complementary dimensions: the implementation of a renewed Local Higher Education, Research and Innovation Scheme (SLESRI) between the University of Poitiers and the Grand Poitiers urban community, and the development of the EC2U Alliance of European Universities coordinated by the University of Poitiers. At local level, the scheme structures territorial economic development through Science and Technology Parks (Technopoles), collaborative research and joint laboratories with private companies, creating direct pathways to innovation and supporting local R&I ecosystems. At European level, the EC2U Alliance connects nine universities and municipalities through the EC2U Pan-European Knowledge Ecosystem (PEKE), strengthening innovation, entrepreneurship and knowledge-sharing across territories.

The University of Poitiers and the EC2U Alliance of European Universities provide a strong example of how higher education institutions can act as ecosystem anchors for regional innovation, territorial cohesion and European cooperation. The initiative combines a renewed Local Higher Education, Research and Innovation Scheme (SLESRI) developed with the Grand Poitiers urban community and the broader transnational collaboration enabled through the EC2U Alliance.

Its significance lies in connecting local and European innovation ecosystems through a long-term, multi-level approach that integrates research, education, entrepreneurship and territorial development. At local level, the project aims to strengthen economic development and innovation capacity by mobilising Science and Technology Parks (Technopoles), collaborative research and territorial partnership agreements. The University of Poitiers actively supports the creation of joint laboratories with private companies, accelerating the transfer of knowledge and creating direct pathways from research to innovation.

At European level, since 2020, the EC2U Alliance connects nine universities and municipalities and recently launched its Pan-European Knowledge Ecosystem (PEKE), in 2024. The initiative promotes collaboration between municipalities, universities, businesses, NGOs, incubators and civil society actors, helping local innovation ecosystems become more interconnected and internationally visible.

The project has faced challenges linked to coordinating multiple institutional and territorial actors across different governance levels, aligning local and European priorities, and sustaining long-term engagement among diverse stakeholders. Nevertheless, it has achieved significant impact. The initiative has connected 23 innovation centres through the Lighthouses of Innovation network, organised staff exchanges and virtual innovation lectures reaching more than 13,000 viewers, supported a Makeathon involving over 100 participants across all EC2U cities and universities, created three Living Labs, and facilitated citizen science and innovation hub initiatives with strong societal relevance and European added value.



Recipes of Innovation

An EC2U Cookbook with best practices
from 7 European city-universities



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Beyond Projects: The OsloMet Model for Cross-Sectoral Ecosystem Orchestration

Institution: Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet)

Country/scope: Norway/Akershus region

Funding model: Blended model

Governance: Project owner – prorektor for societal improvement and collaboration, project management group – R&D Department

Overview: OsloMet’s initiative is unique in moving beyond isolated projects to a permanent, multi-level ecosystem orchestration model. Anchored in its “University for the Region” strategy, it integrates strategic agreements, coordinated knowledge matchmaking, and place-based living labs into a coherent governance system. This allows the university to act not just as a partner, but as a system-level integrator aligning municipalities, research, and civil society around shared challenges.

Its distinctiveness lies in institutionalizing collaboration: central coordination replaces fragmented outreach, municipal needs directly shape research agendas, and “bridge-builder” roles ensure continuous knowledge exchange. Despite challenges such as institutional silos and differing operational timelines, the model has enabled 17 formal partnerships and a shift toward transformational, co-created solutions.

The OsloMet initiative represents a significant evolution in how higher education institutions (HEIs) engage with their regions, shifting from fragmented, project-based collaboration to a structured, system-level approach to ecosystem orchestration. Anchored in its 2025–2030 Social Improvement Strategy, OsloMet positions itself as a “University for the Region,” embedding research, education, and innovation within regional development priorities. Its model operates across strategic, tactical, and operational levels, combining formalized agreements with municipalities, coordinated matchmaking of knowledge needs, and place-based “living labs” such as OsloMet-Holmlia. These mechanisms enable co-creation with public authorities and communities, particularly in areas like urban inclusion, demographic change, and climate challenges.

The project demonstrates that HEIs can serve as ecosystem anchors by aligning diverse stakeholders—municipalities, regions, civil society, and academia—through long-term governance structures rather than temporary projects. Centralized coordination, joint problem definition, and “bridge-builder” roles ensure that knowledge flows effectively across institutional boundaries, reinforcing the university’s role as both facilitator and driver of regional innovation.

Key challenges include overcoming institutional silos and aligning differing operational rhythms between academia and public administration. Despite this, the initiative has achieved substantial qualitative and quantitative impact. It has transformed partnerships from transactional service delivery into collaborative problem-solving, established 17 formalized regional partnerships, and developed practical tools for knowledge use in public services. It has also contributed to social outcomes, such as increased recruitment of multicultural students into key professions.

Overall, OsloMet's model illustrates how HEIs can strengthen regional competitiveness and social cohesion, acting as enduring anchors within innovation ecosystems while addressing complex societal challenges



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OSLO METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
STORBYUNIVERSITETET



Newcastle HELIX: A Place-Based Urban Innovation District

Institution: Newcastle University (in partnership with Newcastle City Council and Legal & General)

Country/scope: United Kingdom (Newcastle, North East England)

Funding model: Blended funding model combining public sector land and investment, institutional private capital, national/EU funding, and commercial revenues.

Governance: Long-term public–private partnership between Newcastle University, Newcastle City Council, and Legal & General.

Overview: Newcastle HELIX is a 24-acre city-centre innovation district developed on a former industrial site to create a living laboratory for urban innovation. It integrates research, education, commercial activity, housing and public space within a single, mixed-use environment. The initiative brings together university research facilities, innovation centres, businesses, and community infrastructure to accelerate solutions to major societal challenges. By co-locating diverse actors, HELIX fosters collaboration, knowledge exchange, and innovation. The project also reinforces the university’s role as a civic anchor institution, embedding it within a broader urban ecosystem that connects global research excellence with local economic and social development.

Newcastle HELIX represents a significant evolution in how universities contribute to regional innovation ecosystems, positioning higher education institutions as active place-based anchors rather than isolated campuses. Its central objective is to create an integrated urban innovation district that accelerates research translation, economic growth and societal impact through the co-location of academia, industry, public sector partners and local communities. The initiative focuses on key thematic areas including urban science, data, ageing and sustainability, ensuring a clear and differentiated strategic identity.

A defining feature of HELIX is its “living laboratory” model, where the site itself is used to test new approaches to energy, mobility, digital infrastructure and health. This enables real-world experimentation and rapid scaling of innovation. The project has also demonstrated the importance of long-term civic–university alignment and patient capital, supported by institutional investors, in delivering complex urban regeneration initiatives.

The project has encountered challenges, including the need to sustain commitment across long development timelines, balance commercial viability with public value, and ensure inclusive growth that benefits surrounding communities. Managing the complexity of multiple stakeholders and funding streams has also required strong governance and coordination.

The impact of HELIX is both quantitative and qualitative. It has created or accommodated approximately 4,000 jobs, delivered over 500,000 square feet of commercial and research space, and will provide around 450 homes within the city centre. Beyond these metrics, it has strengthened pathways for research commercialisation, enhanced talent attraction and retention, and positioned Newcastle as an international exemplar of sustainable urban innovation.

Overall, HELIX provides a transferable European model demonstrating how universities can leverage partnerships, investment and place-based strategies to drive inclusive and sustainable regional transformation.



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Center of the Innovative Ecosystem of the Frontline Zaporizhzhia Region

Institution: Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic National University

Country/scope: Ukraine / comprehensive: from regional to national and transnational

Funding model: Own funds of the Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic National University, attracting state funding, business funds, international projects and grants.

Governance: Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic National University with the involvement of business, community and regional authorities

Overview: An innovative ecosystem has been formed through collaboration between the region's leading polytechnic higher education institution, the scientific community, businesses, and local authorities. This ecosystem aims to preserve human capital to ensure stability and further development in the frontline region.

In the extremely difficult conditions of a front-line industrial region, Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic National University has established a sustainable innovation ecosystem. Its primary significance lies in preserving highly qualified technical human capital. By transforming institutional interaction into manageable value, the ecosystem prevents the drain of critical talent when it is needed most. It involves thousands of children, youth, and adults in polytechnic education to form a skilled core of workers. These individuals are vital to sustaining the regional economy during the war and driving post-war reconstruction.

Strategic Multi-Sector Impact:

The ecosystem operates on a "value circle" model, driving distinct impacts across multiple sectors:

- **Industrial & High-Tech Advancement:** Cooperating with 57 business partners and establishing the "Science Park" enables the direct implementation of research into production, ensuring the country's industry has access to high-tech products.
- **Digital Transformation:** Through the "Zaporizhzhia European Digital Innovation Hub" (ZP EDIH), the ecosystem provides critical retraining in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and cybersecurity for civil servants, engineers, and entrepreneurs.
- **Adaptive Governance:** Direct collaboration with city government uses scientific analysis to deploy adaptive solutions for critical infrastructure, logistics, spatial security, and economic diversification.

National and European Integration Significance:

Ultimately, this ecosystem serves as a national benchmark for institutional unity, demonstrating how a regional university, local government, and business can unite to maintain societal resilience. Supported by a diversified financing model—combining university, state, business, and international grant funding—it secures a continuous chain of development. This sustained progress facilitates the full integration of Ukraine's innovation space, technical standards, and human potential into the broader European community.



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European Digital Innovation Hub Adria – EDIH Adria

Institution: University of Rijeka and STEP RI – Science and Technology Park of the University of Rijeka

Country/scope: Regional, Adriatic Croatia (NUTS2)

Funding model: Blended and synergistic funding model. Digital Europe Programme (50%) and Croatia’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan for EDIH 1.0/European Regional Development Fund for EDIH 2.0 (50%)

Governance: Partnership model with 2 universities, 2 partners from industry and 2 business support organisations

Overview: EDIH Adria (European Digital Innovation Hub Adria helps small and medium-sized enterprises and public organisations in Croatia to adopt digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and high-performance computing. It is part of the wider EU network of digital innovation hubs and supports organisations through training, advisory services, and testing new solutions before investment.

The project is jointly funded by the European Union’s Digital Europe Programme and Croatia’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Phase 1 (2023-2025) and European Regional Development Fund in Phase 2 (2026-2028).

EDIH Adria has achieved strong engagement, including providing, in Phase 1, 204 Digital Maturity Assessments, 229 organisations trained, 87 supported through bootcamps, and 71 using Test Before Invest services. In total, it has delivered over €2,6 million in services and has been recognised among the top-performing EDIHs in the EU, significantly strengthening digital innovation and skills in the region.

This case study presents how the University of Rijeka (UNIRI) has evolved from a project-based collaborator into a system-level orchestrator of a regional innovation ecosystem in a less-developed cohesion region.

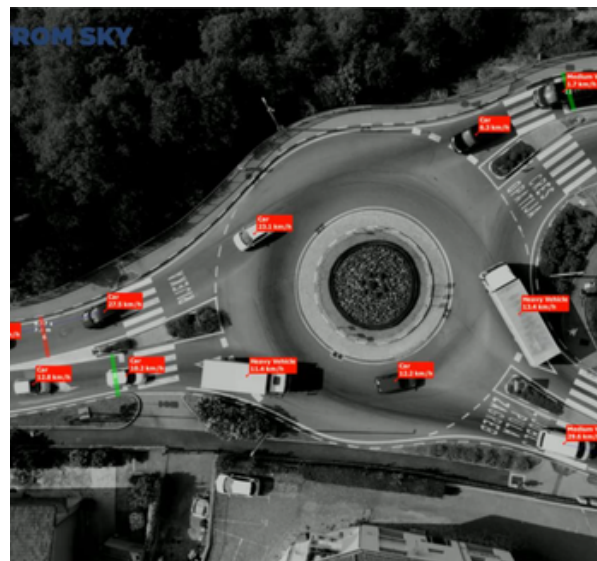
At the core of this transformation is EDIH Adria, a European Digital Innovation Hub coordinated by UNIRI, which functions as an operational backbone for regional digital and green transformation in the areas of health and quality of life, maritime transport and mobility, and energy and sustainability.

EDIH Adria integrates services such as digital maturity assessments, test-before-invest facilities, data analysis in the context of AI adoption, advanced skills training, innovation bootcamps, and investment support, targeting SMEs and public sector organisations.

EDIH Adria is embedded in a broader institutional innovation framework developed by UNIRI, which includes:

- dedicated governance structures (University Centre for Research and Innovation and specifically its Department for Innovation and Knowledge Valorisation),
- internal incentive schemes (UNIRI-INOVA) supporting interdisciplinary, application-oriented research,
- ecosystem tools such as the Regional Innovation Matchmaking Platform (RIMAP), enabling demand-driven knowledge transfer and open innovation,
- participation in large-scale ecosystem initiatives (INNO2MARE Excellence Hub, North Adriatic Hydrogen Valley),
- capacity-building and skills development through EU projects and alliances (YUFERING, DIOSI, YUFE).

Rather than operating as isolated projects, these instruments are deliberately aligned to act as persistent ecosystem infrastructure, allowing UNIRI to coordinate actors across academia, industry, public authorities and civil society, as well as between different multi-governance levels.



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Impronta Granada: A Quadruple Helix Alliance for Regional Development

Institution: University of Granada

Country/scope: Spain — Province of Granada, covering 174 municipalities, with transferability to the regional level through Impronta Andalucía.

Funding model: Blended funding model combining institutional support from the University of Granada with competitive European and national project funding and contributions from territorial partners.

Governance: Quadruple helix governance model led by the University of Granada and the Provincial Council of Granada, involving public administrations, researchers, companies, civil society, students and local communities

Overview: Impronta Granada is a quadruple helix alliance between the University of Granada and the Provincial Council of Granada that connects university knowledge with territorial priorities across 174 municipalities. Built on participatory Urban Agendas, it combines a digital platform organising more than 1,000 territorial measures with a portfolio of co-creation programmes, including territorial governance, science–policy labs, living labs, citizen science, challenge-driven entrepreneurship and employability initiatives. Operationally anchored in Medialab UGR, the initiative provides a structured interface between local challenges and academic expertise, helping public administrations, communities and researchers co-design solutions for regional development. Impronta Granada has strengthened municipal engagement, supported evidence-informed policymaking and contributed to broader cultural, social and economic impact in the province.

Impronta Granada is a strategic initiative that positions the University of Granada as an active ecosystem anchor for territorial innovation, public policy and regional development. Its significance lies in transforming the relationship between the university and its surrounding territory from occasional collaboration into a structured, open and long-term alliance. Through its partnership with the Provincial Council of Granada, the initiative connects academic knowledge, research capacity and student talent with the priorities of 174 municipalities.

The project's main objective is to make university expertise more accessible and actionable for local administrations, communities and organisations. It focuses on six interconnected areas: territorial governance, science–policy collaboration, open innovation and living labs, citizen science, challenge-driven entrepreneurship, and employability and talent retention. Its digital platform organises more than 1,000 measures derived from participatory Urban Agendas, creating a searchable framework for matching territorial challenges with university capacities.

Key challenges include managing political and institutional complexity, aligning different professional cultures and timeframes, sustaining engagement across a large and diverse province, and managing expectations when proposals depend on public decision-making processes. Trust-building, facilitation and continuity have therefore been essential success factors.

The initiative has generated both qualitative and quantitative impact. It has mobilised more than 30 partners through European and national projects such as Soilcrates, Urban Imprint and Engage Green, representing over EUR 1 million in funding. It has supported 191 student internship projects linked to Urban Agenda priorities, reached around 300 students through citizen science activities, and funded more than ten citizen science projects. Impronta Granada, also played a central role in the participatory process for Granada's European Capital of Culture 2031 candidacy, gathering more than 1,300 contributions and helping Granada become one of the four finalist Spanish cities.



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TECH.LAND: A German-Dutch Cross-Border Innovation Programme

Institution: Saxion University of Applied Sciences (in cooperation with Oost NL and IHK Nord Westfalen)

Country/scope: Interregional (cross-border): North Westphalia – Eastern Netherlands (Gelderland and Overijssel)

Funding model: Blended Dutch-German funding model combining partner contributions, regional development resources, in-kind contributions from knowledge institutions, EU/cross-border project funding, and event-related sponsorship.

Governance: Cross-border programme governed by the initiating partners IHK Nord Westfalen, Twente Board and Oost NL, supported by programme management for coordination, communication, finances, and reporting, with supporting partners and cluster leads driving activities within the thematic clusters.

Overview: ECH.LAND is a Dutch-German cross-border ecosystem initiative connecting businesses, higher education institutions, regional authorities, and development actors through structured triple-helix collaboration in the East Netherlands–North Westphalia border region. The ecosystem brings together 23 partners, including regional development actors, public authorities, industry/chambers and four core HEIs: Saxion University of Applied Sciences, University of Twente, Münster University of Applied Sciences and University of Münster. Its mission is to strengthen regional competitiveness and address societal challenges by bringing Dutch and German actors together around technology, innovation, talent, and investment. TECH.LAND has consolidated this partner base into thematic clusters, project pipelines and joint visibility activities in Energy, Circular Economy, Health & MedTech, and Advanced Manufacturing & Robotics, with similar structures now emerging in defence and chip technology.

TECH.LAND is a regional ecosystem initiative bringing together partners across the East Netherlands–North Westphalia border region. It shows how HEIs act as ecosystem anchors when moving beyond individual projects into a standing regional infrastructure for innovation, creating connective tissue between education, applied research, business needs, public policy, and European project development.

HEIs anchor this ecosystem in four ways. First, TECH.LAND's thematic clusters translate regional challenges into applied research and innovation agendas. Rather than mere networking labels, they organise companies, researchers and regional actors around shared priorities, project pipelines, and funding opportunities. Second, HEIs connect talent to the ecosystem. Saxion UAS brings the applied-research perspective into TECH.LAND through its applied research groups, Centres of Expertise and Smart Solution Labs, where students work with companies on practical cross-border challenges. Third, HEIs create durable cooperation structures by providing continuity in knowledge development, research capacity and talent engagement beyond one-off projects or events. Fourth, they strengthen access to European and cross-border funding by turning shared priorities into research-based, practice-oriented project pipelines.

Still, challenges remain. Sustaining engagement, clarifying roles, and measuring ecosystem-level impact is no easy feat. TECH.LAND responds through recurring convening, cluster agendas, missions, flagship events, and cross-border project development. Impact is already visible. In the hydrogen cluster alone, over 100 actors are connected across the Dutch-German border. These agendas are reflected in projects, programmes, funding instruments and applications, including Interreg projects such as MOMO-C (€3.9m), Two4C (€3.9m), BOOST (€2.6m) and Manufacturing NextMaterials (€7.0m); the ERDF/JTF-funded Interactive Knowledge and Technology Spaces (€1.5m); the Horizon Europe H2EART Hydrogen Valley application; and INDUSTR_I4.0, a Dutch-German instrument helping SMEs bridge the gap to digitalisation. TECH.LAND's annual flagship event, Xperience, attracted over 1,200 participants, including policymakers, HEIs, businesses and international delegations.



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Brightlands: A triple-helix ecosystem that drives regional innovation

Institution: Maastricht University / Brightlands Maastricht Health Campus

Country/scope: The Netherlands (Province Limburg)

Funding model: Blended model (knowledge institution, academic hospital, industry, provincial government)

Governance: Brightlands Maastricht Health Campus is structured as a private limited company with three shareholders: Maastricht University, Province Limburg, and the Academic Hospital Maastricht

Overview: Over the past 15 years, Brightlands has developed into a world-class innovation ecosystem. Its four geographically and thematically distinct sites drive innovation through triple-helix collaboration. The core of each Brightlands campus is formed by Maastricht University and Province Limburg, complemented by at least one local triple-helix partner. As such, each campus is solidly anchored and aligned with local public and private stakeholders.

Within the ecosystem, Brightlands Maastricht Health Campus takes a unique position as the valorisation (technology transfer) partner for several of Maastricht University's faculties as well as the academic hospital. By combining classical technology transfer with a pro-active attitude towards venture building, Brightlands Maastricht Health Campus pursues an impact-driven approach to academic knowledge valorisation and entrepreneurship.

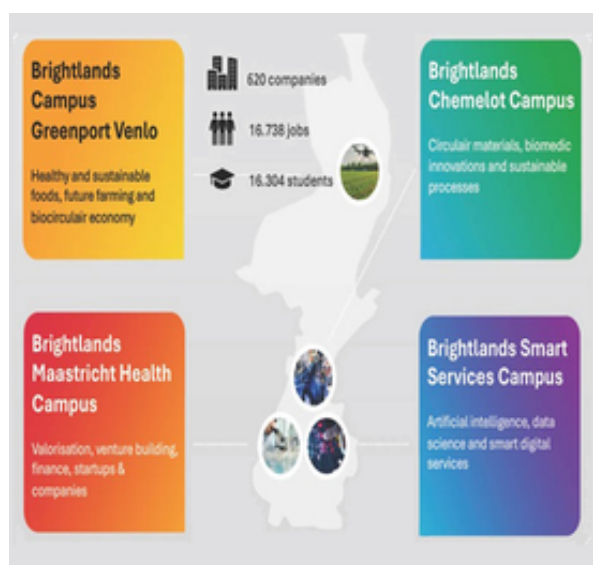
The province of Limburg witnessed an economic transition from rural agriculture and mining, via petrochemical industry, into high-tech innovation. Maastricht University, founded only 50 years ago, has been instrumental in facilitating this development. About 15 years ago, key public and private stakeholders took a forward-looking approach to encourage effective ecosystem development: Brightlands was founded to simulate ecosystem development, public-private collaboration, and effective valorisation. Since, the Brightlands ecosystem with Maastricht University at its heart, has enabled socio-economic growth and impact by:

- Establishing an attractive ecosystem for innovative enterprises;
- Providing access to infrastructure and resources that encourage impact;
- Fostering stakeholder alignment across themes of strategic interest;
- Attracting and educating talented scientists and innovators;
- Facilitating (cross-border) collaboration with public and private partners.

However, the ecosystem also faces challenges related to (regional) competition for enterprises and talent, effective scaling of start-ups, fragmentation among and across stakeholders, and establishing long-term financial sustainability.

Over the past 15 years, the Brightlands ecosystem has grown into a flourishing innovation community, home to about 500 companies, 16.000 jobs, and 13.000 students. It has contributed to the regional transition towards hightech innovation and delivered some great examples:

- Pharmacell was acquired by Lonza and became one of the largest regional employers;
- MosaMeat introduced the first labgrown burger and moves towards market entry;
- FortiMedix has been acquired by Medtronic;
- Cross-border research institutions like the Aachen-Maastricht Institute for BiobasedMaterials (AMIBM);
- Interfaculty collaboration stimulates real-life innovation and impact;
- The Meuse-Rhine region, with Maastricht as the main site, is one of the official candidates to host the Einstein Telescope. Maastricht University already hosts the ET Pathfinder as a leading R&D infrastructure that is further expanding.



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