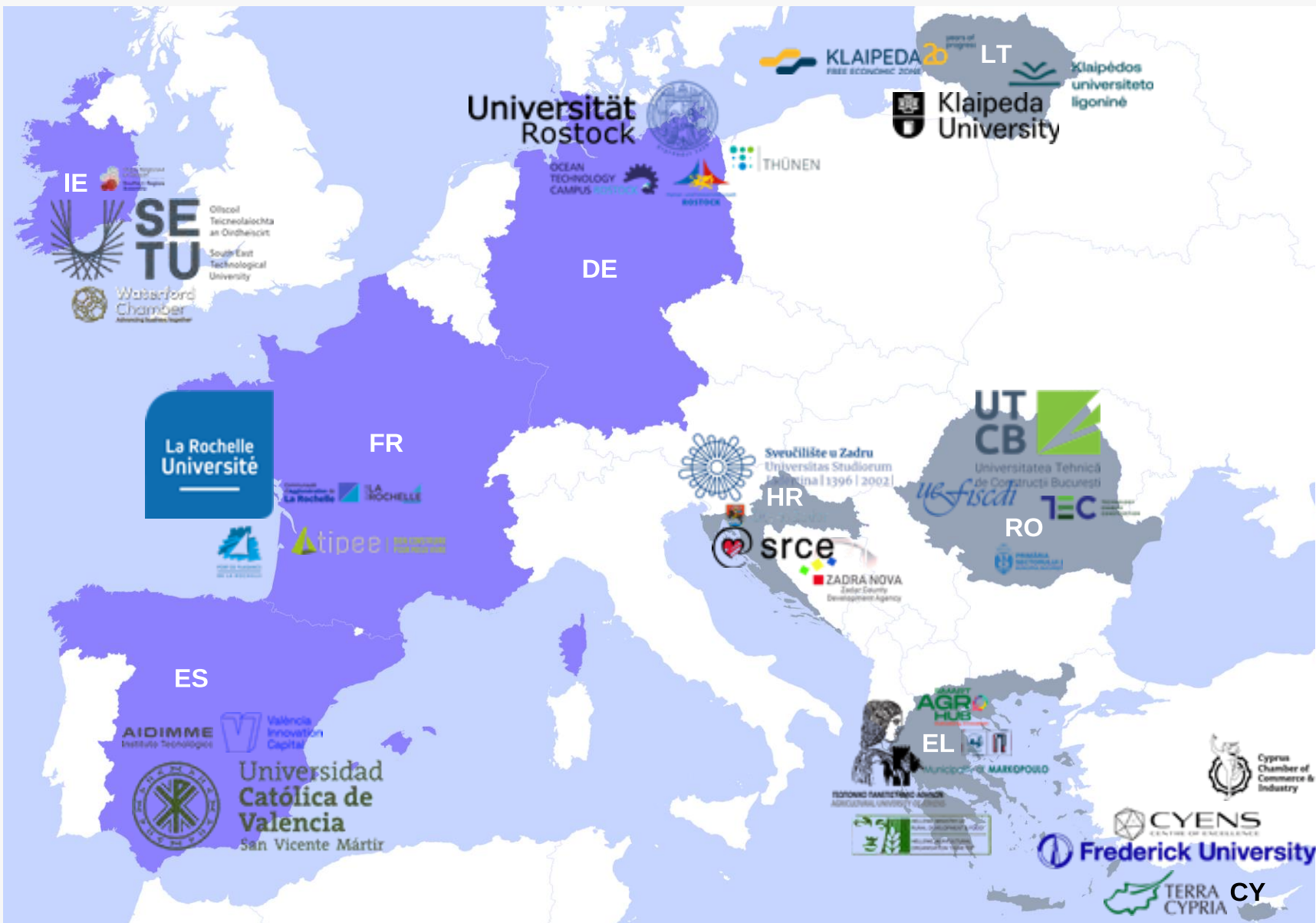# From Practice to Institutional Impact: Research Careers and Management WIDERA Projects
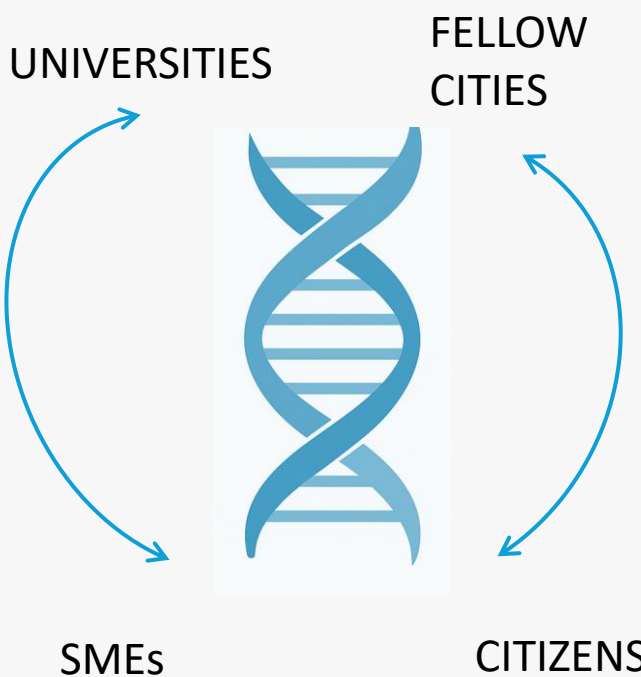
Turning WIDERA projects into institutional change: Lessons from Research Management Practice

EU-CONEXUS ENABLES → EU-CONEXUS EXCEED: scaling institutional change within a European University Alliance

Ilinca Nastase, Technical University of Civil Engineering of Bucharest
29th of January 2026

EU-CONEXUS ENABLES → EU-CONEXUS EXCEED: scaling institutional change within a European University Alliance

- WIDERA is about **institutional capacity**, not only projects
- European University Alliances make change faster and more sustaina**ble**
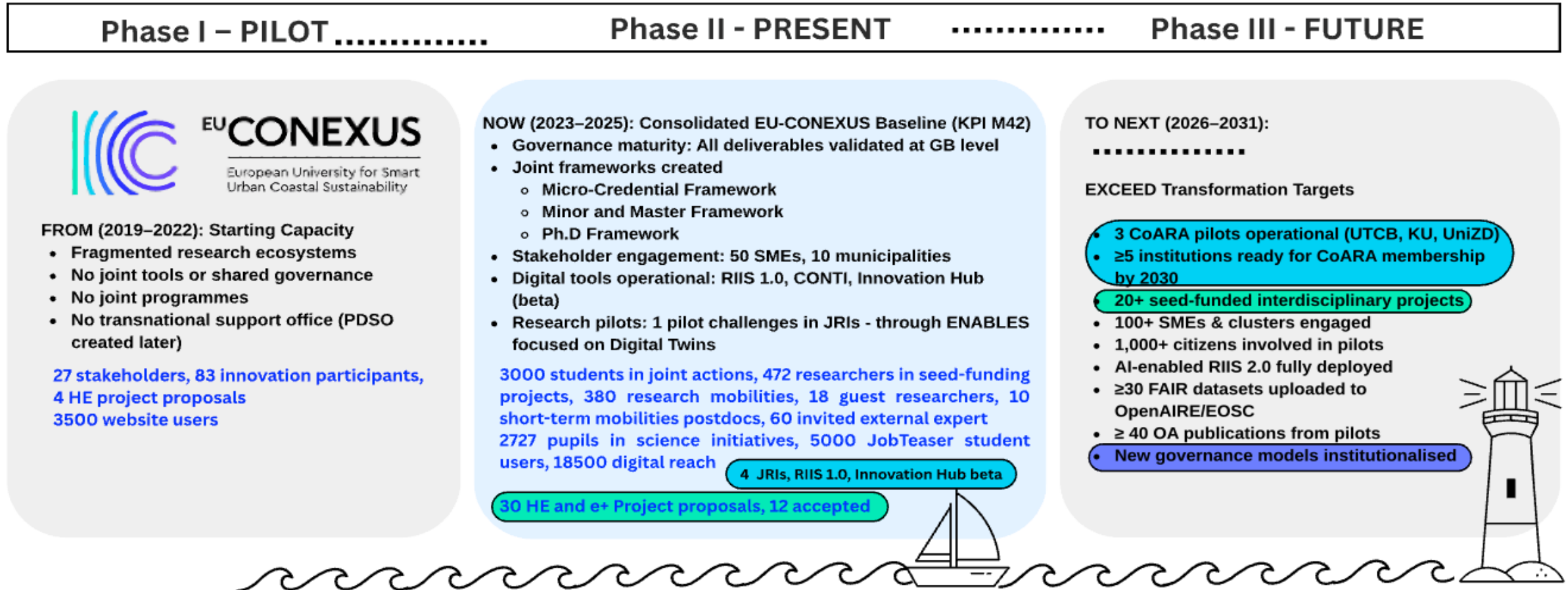- Our pathway: **ENABLES (build) → EXCEED/EEI (scale & consolidate)**

The ENABLES initiative is structured over a **60-month duration**, starting in **February 2024**, and it supports the **European Research Area (ERA)** policy agenda, particularly actions related to international cooperation, open science, gender equality, and green/digital transitions

Project number: 101136822 **Start date:** 01/02/2024 **End date:** 31/01/2029 **Funding:** 4 966 092 Eur **Programme:** HORIZON-WIDERA - 2023-ACCESS-03

EXCEED is our latest project proposal submitted under the HORIZON-WIDERA-2025-01-ACCESS-01: European Excellence Initiative (EEI) which represents the next step after ENABLES, moving from capacity building to the institutionalisation and scaling of reforms within the EU-CONEXUS alliance.
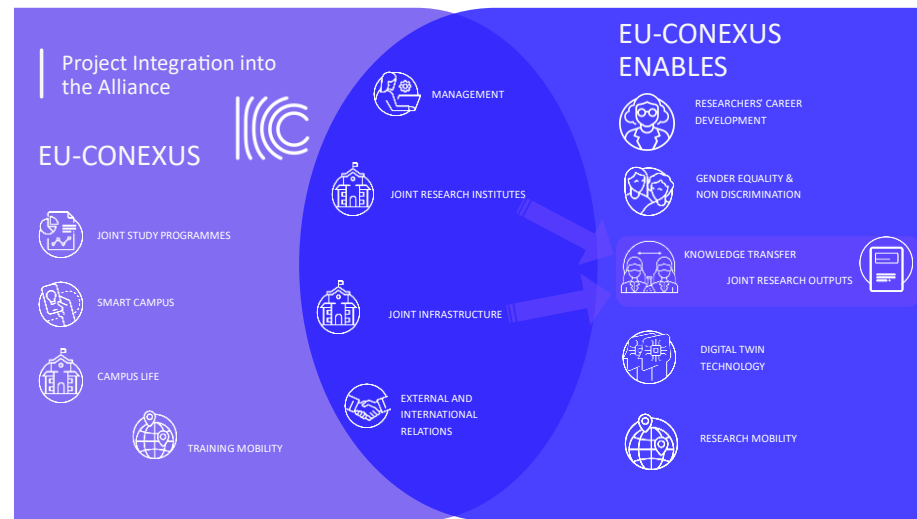
Mario Draghi's competitiveness report: '*Europe needs faster innovation and higher productivity to remain competitive. That's not only a funding problem, it's an institutional capability problem* '

EU-CONEXUS ENABLES → EU-CONEXUS EXCEED: scaling institutional change within a European University Alliance

Phase I – PILOT .... **Phase II - PRESENT** .... **Phase III - FUTURE**

EU CONEXUS
European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability

FROM (2019–2022): Starting Capacity
- Fragmented research ecosystems
- No joint tools or shared governance
- No joint programmes
- No transnational support office (PDSO created later)

27 stakeholders, 83 innovation participants, 4 HE project proposals
3500 website users

NOW (2023–2025): Consolidated EU-CONEXUS Baseline (KPI M42)
- Governance maturity: All deliverables validated at GB level
- Joint frameworks created
  - Micro-Credential Framework
  - Minor and Master Framework
  - Ph.D Framework
- Stakeholder engagement: 50 SMEs, 10 municipalities
- Digital tools operational: RIIS 1.0, CONTI, Innovation Hub (beta)
- Research pilots: 1 pilot challenges in JRIs - through ENABLES focused on Digital Twins

3000 students in joint actions, 472 researchers in seed-funding projects, 380 research mobilities, 18 guest researchers, 10 short-term mobilities postdocs, 60 invited external expert 2727 pupils in science initiatives, 5000 JobTeaser student users, 18500 digital reach

4 JRIs, RIIS 1.0, Innovation Hub beta

30 HE and e+ Project proposals, 12 accepted

TO NEXT (2026–2031):
....

EXCEED Transformation Targets

- 3 CoARA pilots operational (UTCB, KU, UniZD)
- ≥5 institutions ready for CoARA membership by 2030
- 20+ seed-funded interdisciplinary projects
- 100+ SMEs & clusters engaged
- 1,000+ citizens involved in pilots
- AI-enabled RIIS 2.0 fully deployed
- ≥30 FAIR datasets uploaded to OpenAIRE/EOSC
- ≥ 40 OA publications from pilots
- New governance models institutionalised

Mario Draghi's competitiveness report: *'Europe needs faster innovation and higher productivity to remain competitive. That's not only a funding problem, it's an institutional capability problem '*

What "Research Careers + Research Management" mean in practice (ENABLES lessons)

- RMA capacity building - training, community of practice, mobility exchanges
- Research careers - early-career researcher training + mentoring approach
- Alliance mechanisms - joint PhD cotutelles, postdoc mobilities, micro-seeding logic
- Institutional behaviours - open science, research integrity, gender equality embedded

*If we read Draghi reports carefully, the message is: **simplify, professionalise, and scale !** The WIDERA programme represents an instrument for professionalising research management, improving career frameworks, and enabling reforms that make organisations more innovation-ready.*

Project Integration into the Alliance

EU-CONEXUS

- JOINT STUDY PROGRAMMES
- SMART CAMPUS
- CAMPUS LIFE
- TRAINING MOBILITY

- MANAGEMENT
- JOINT RESEARCH INSTITUTES
- JOINT INFRASTRUCTURE
- EXTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

EU-CONEXUS ENABLES

- RESEARCHERS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT
- GENDER EQUALITY & NON DISCRIMINATION
- KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER
- JOINT RESEARCH OUTPUTS
- DIGITAL TWIN TECHNOLOGY
- RESEARCH MOBILITY

ENABLES project examples

| 1 Feb 2024 – 30 Apr 2025 | 1 May 2025 – 31 Ian 2027 | 1 Feb 2027 – 31 Ian 2029 |

I. Framework set-up

- WP 1 Management 1
- WP2 Framework for Knowledge Transfer with focus on Digital Twin solutions
- WP3 Research Career Development support activities
- WP 4 D&C&O 1

II. Knowledge Transfer

- WP 5 Management 2
- WP 9 Management 3
- WP6 Stakeholders Exchanges – Bridging the Gap Between Cities and Universities
- WP7 Joints research Activities
- WP10 Research Integrity and gender equality consolidation
- WP 8 D&C&O 2
- WP 11 D&C&O 3

WP3 Research Career Development support activities

Establishing training needs analysis (M1-M4) Aim - Understanding the professional development needs of early career researchers (ECRs) in widening countries through the design, distribution, and analysis of a targeted **Training Needs Analysis (TNA) survey**.

Step 1 - Survey Design

- SETU designed an online survey using the platform Qualtrics. The survey drew on established frameworks including the European Competence Framework for Researchers.

- The survey included both quantitative Likert-scale items and qualitative open-text prompts.

- It was structured into three sections: (1) Research Culture/Environment, (2) Training and Development, and (3) Demographics.

Step 2 - Survey Dissemination

- Widening partners (FredU, UTCB, AUA, UNIZD, KU, ONU) distributed the survey via internal communication channels (mailing lists, intranet postings, institutional events).

Step 3 - Data Collection and Analysis

- Survey was open from May to June 2024

- **367 valid responses** (anonymous participation, encouraging open and honest feedback)

- SETU led the **data analysis**, applying both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify key trends and priority areas for researcher development.
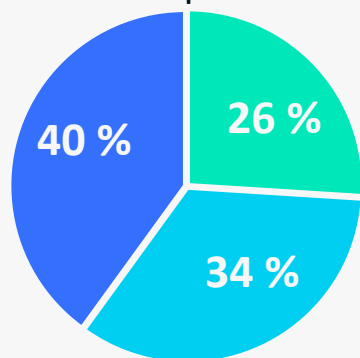
WP3 Research Career Development support activities

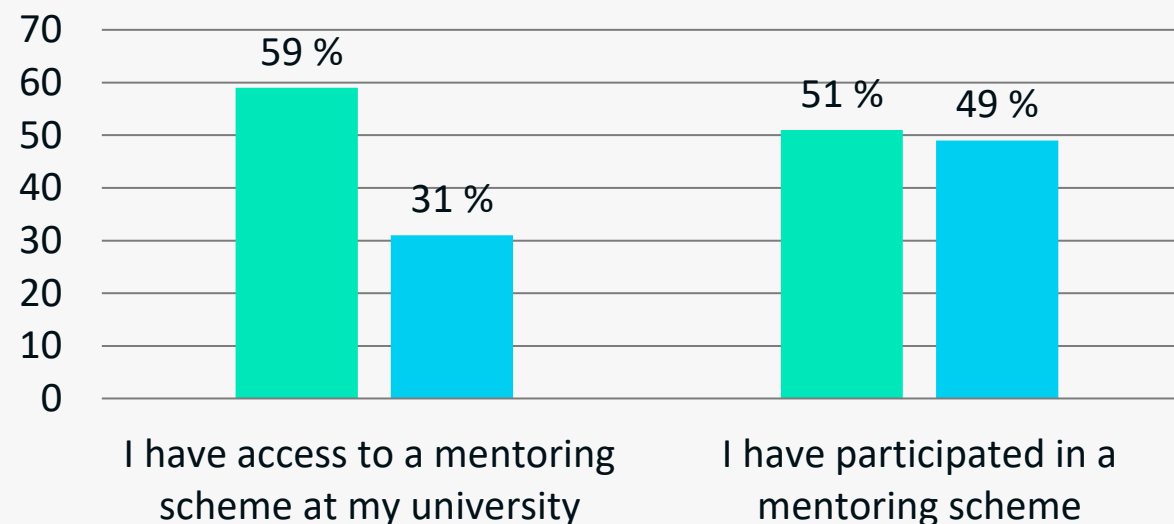## Establishing training needs analysis

- **Key findings**

My university provides training and development opportunities for professional growth

Pie chart:
- 26 %
- 34 %
- 40 %

■ Neutral / Disagree ■ Strongly Agree ■ Somewhat Agree

Mentoring Access and Uptake

Bar chart values:
- I have access to a mentoring scheme at my university: 59 %, 31 %
- I have participated in a mentoring scheme: 51 %, 49 %

- **34%** of respondents strongly agreed their university provides training and development opportunities

- An additional **40%** somewhat agreed, but **26%** expressed uncertainty or disagreement, indicating inconsistent institutional support.

- **59%** reported access to a mentoring scheme,

- but only **51%** had actually participated in one.

WP3 Research Career Development support activities

Establishing training needs analysis

- **Key findings**

Competence Area	Specific Needs Identified
Self-management	Stress resilience, managing burnout, time management, work-life balance
Working with Others	Teamwork, leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, navigating institutional cultures
Making an Impact	Communicating research effectively, engaging with policymakers and public stakeholders
Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)	Embedding EDI throughout the research lifecycle, understanding funder expectations
Research Proposal Writing	Writing competitive grant proposals, understanding funder review processes
Commercialisation	Translating research into societal impact, licensing, spin-out companies, industry links

The survey highlighted significant structural gaps in access to mentoring, feedback, and career support.

Addressing these gaps supports long-term skills growth and helps build sustainable research capacity in widening countries.
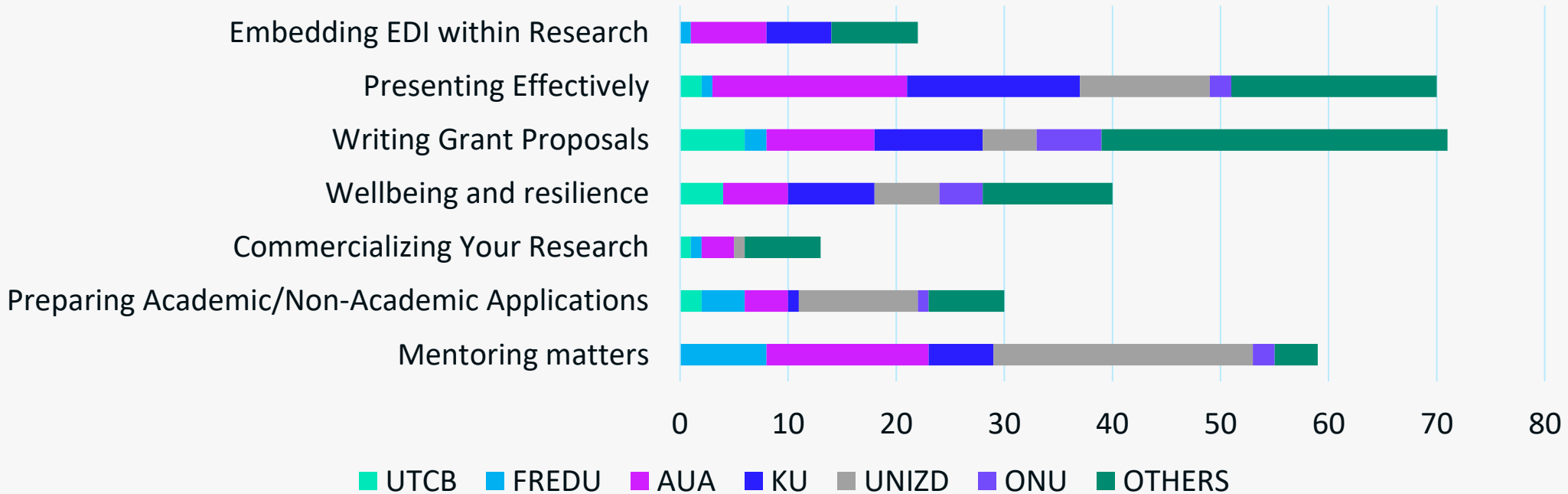
Milestone #4: Understanding training needs for the target groups

WP3 Research Career Development support activities

"Expanding Your Horizons" Researcher Career development Training programme

- **Widening participants**: 165 unique Early Career Researchers (ECRs)
AUA (57), FredU (10), KU (31), UTCB (7), UNIZD (45), and ONU (15)

- The high participation reflects both successful outreach efforts and high interest in the topics offered.

- Overall, the EYH programme demonstrated the value of structured, cross-consortium training and highlighted key areas of interest and development needs among early-career researchers.

WP3 Research Career Development support activities

Bespoke Training on funding proposal preparation and post-award management (M3-M15)
Lead: AUA

RESEARCH MANAGEMENT ADMINISTRATORS MOBILITY AND NETWORK PROGRAMME

Aim Enhancing capacity in research management and support services, with a particular focus on Research Management Administrators (RMAs) from widening partners

Step 1 – Establishing framework

- WP3 representatives from all partners collaborated to identify key topics to be covered on the Research Management Administrators (RMA) training programme.

- WP3 representatives also agreed on the terms of a mobility exchange initiative.

Step 2 - Establishing Community of Practice (CoP) for RMAs

- A Community of Practice (CoP) for RMAs was created and hosted on the Whaller platform. CoP brought together RMA representatives from all partner institutions. The framework for the RMAs CoP and the RMA Mobility Exchange program was outlined in a **Brochure (D3.3)**, which served as a key dissemination across the EU-CONEXUS community.

Step 3 - Developing timetable, disseminating program

- Non-Widening partners identified expert trainers from their institutions to deliver the workshops online.

- The CoP was promoted within all partner universities and via EU-CONEXUS and ENABLES communication channels.

- Training sessions were attended by RMAs from both Widening and non-Widening institutions within the EU-CONEXUS Alliance.

Step 4 - Programme implementation - 8 online workshops were delivered

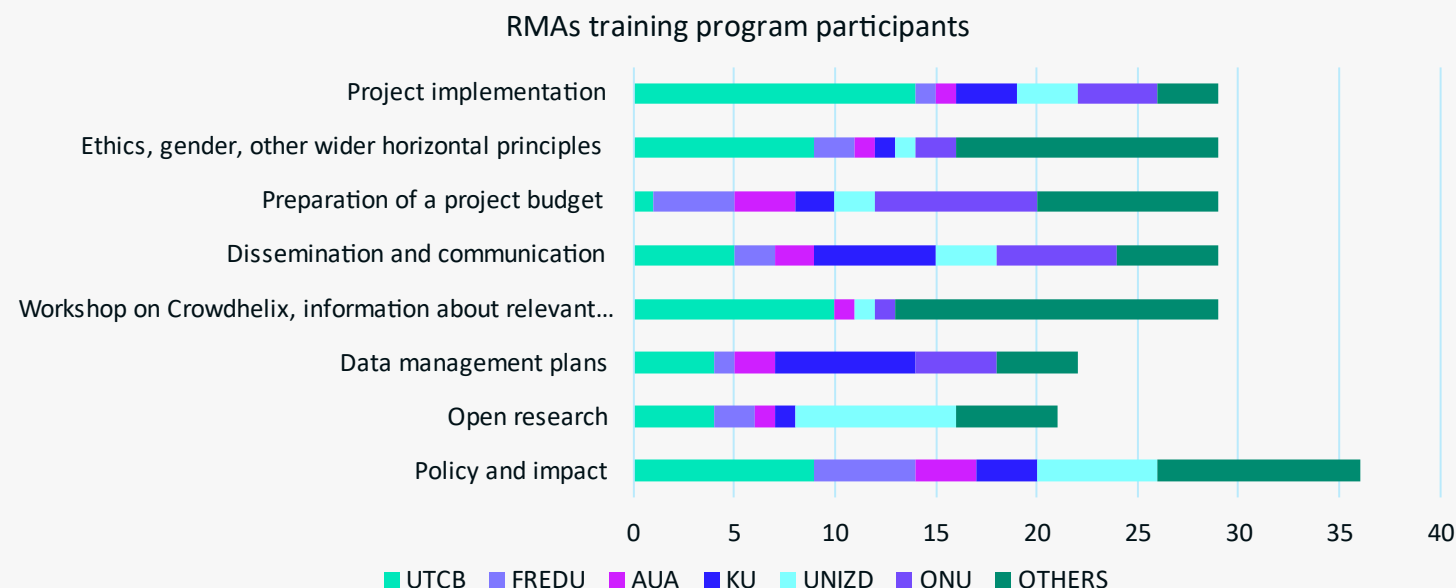- Post-session surveys were conducted to inform future training

WP3 Research Career Development support activities

Bespoke Training on funding proposal preparation and post-award management (M3-M15)

Training	Non-widening partner delivering
Policy and impact	SETU
Open research	UCV
Data management plans	UCV
Workshop on Crowdhelix, information about relevant networks and national contact points	SETU
Dissemination and communication	UROS
Preparation of a project budget	LRUniv
Ethics, gender, other wider horizontal principles	UROS
Project implementation	LRUniv

RMAs training program participants

Legend: UTCB, FREDU, AUA, KU, UNIZD, ONU, OTHERS

- **Widening participants**: 74 unique Research Management Administrators (RMAs)
AUA (6), FredU (7), KU (12), UTCB (23), UNIZD (16), and ONU (10) **Non-widening participants:** 21 unique Research Management Administrators
- ✓ **KR#3.2: at least 60 trainees for funding proposals**

Bespoke Training on funding proposal preparation and post-award management (M3-M15)

RMAs mobility

- A two-day in-person training event was held in SETU

- The training event was designed based on the European Competence Framework for Research Managers (RM-Comp), in collaboration with experts from all non-widening partners.

- Widening partners identified suitable RMA staff, members of the CoP, who would benefit from participating in the event.
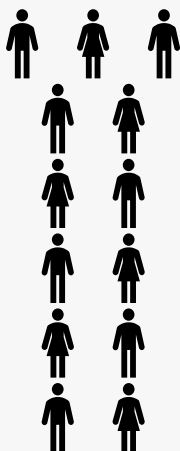
UTCB

AUA

FREDU

UNIZD

KU

ONU

Widening partner trainees who attended the RMA training event at SETU

EU CONEXUS ENABLES

Funded by the European Union

Empowering Research Managers and Administrators

A two day training event hosted by South East Technological University

📅 8-9 April 2025

✓ KR#3.3: 10 short term mobilities

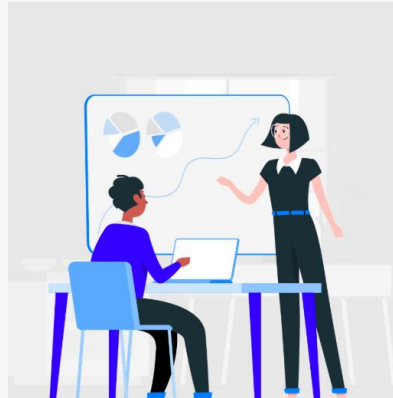# WP3 Research Career Development support activities

Short term mobilities for post-docs - to meet their future supervisors (M3-M15)
Lead: AUA
A **short-term mobility program** for postdoctoral researchers from Widening institutions aiming to identify and connect with potential future supervisors from non-Widening universities.

Step 1 - Establishing framework

- A call was organized by WP3 representatives and launched at EU-CONEXUS ENABLES site.

- Widening partners identified candidates for the mobility.

- **N**on-Widening institutions provided access to host supervisors and research settings.

Step 2 - MSCA Fellowship workshop

- To further support postdocs in preparing high-quality fellowship applications, a tailored MSCA Fellowship online workshop was delivered by SETU on July 4th 2024.

- By enabling tailored short-term mobilities for postdoctoral researchers from widening countries, the task not only supported the development of key research and professional skills, but also fostered international collaborations and mentorship pathways aligned with long-term career progression.

EU-CONEXUS ENABLES Short-Term Mobility Call for Post-Docs

Objectives

The aim of this initiative is:
- Help postdocs expand their network;
- Meet potential future mentors;

EXCEED/EEI "scales" the change

- Institutional modernisation (CoARA-aligned assessment, governance, RMA as a profession)
- Operationalising alliance research structures (JRIs, strategic agendas, PDSO-like support)
- Digital transformation + ecosystems (data, AI-assisted tools, knowledge valorisation, stakeholder links)

HORIZON-WIDERA-2025-01-ACCESS-01: **European Excellence Initiative (EEI)**

Aim: *increase excellence in science and knowledge valorisation in European universities*

Key focus points:

✓ Strategic cooperation between HEIs

✓ Institutional modernisation (CoARA, RMA)

✓ Talent circulation, skills & career development

✓ Digital transformation & AI

✓ Knowledge valorisation & regional innovation ecosystems

✓ At least 51% of the budget must go to Widening countries

✓ Max 20% of the budget may be used for R&I seed funding (separate WP)

Horizon Europe
Widening participation and spreading excellence

284 proposals submitted

€80 million available EU funding

European Excellence Initiative
2025 Call for proposals

What have built...   What we **need** for EU-CONEXUS ++   The call

What have built...

SmUCS

4 JRIS   **6 Challenges**

- CEI
- ESBI
- LSBI
- SCHSI

Smart Coastal Infrastructure for *Disaster Mitigation*

Sustainable Coastal *Waste Management*

Sustainable *Disease Management*

Ensuring Healthy Food and Soil

Protecting Oceans, Seas and Waters

Adaption and Mitigation of Global Climate Change in Coastal Environments

Catalogue research infrastructure

PDSO   **RIIS**

CONTI   *Innovation contest*   *Whaller*

Multidisciplinary work group on digitalization (specific challenges)

Stakeholders Academy

EYH program   RMA - ENABLES

EDI Toolkit   *Female mentorship*

What we need for EU-CONEXUS ++

Matchmaking of reseachers

Operationalization of the JRIs around the Challenges

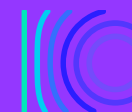Extension of RIIS/Whaller

Increased funding in HE

Upskilling RMA

Re-framing and supporting PDSO

KoP for RMA

Piloting ARA

Connections w. local/regional innovation

Internationalization strategy

The call

1. **Institutional modernisation and reforms**
   - Introduction of modern research assessment practices, in with the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA);
   - Application of modern management practices including improved research management and administration (RMA);
   - Promoting interdisciplinary research entities.

2. **Upskilling of research, technical and management staff**
   - Exchange of academic and non-academic staff for sharing good practices;
   - Training and capacity building for research and innovation management including IPR and application of open science practices;
   - Entrepreneurial and communication training.

3. **Development of research excellence**
   - Sharing R&I capacities including infrastructures;
   - Developing joint strategic R&I agendas;
   - Seed R&I projects to test R&I agendas, explore new joint research stands and consolidate partnership.

4. **Digital transformation**
   - Introduction of AI techniques in science and management;
   - Concept studies for upgrading digital infrastructure;
   - Data science and management.

5. **Outreach**
   - Linkages with inspiring local/regional innovation ecosystem including industry;
   - Engaging with citizens, cities, regions and other non-academic actors;
   - Development of internationalisation strategies and partnerships.

EU-CONEXUS EXCEED Vision

"To reshape, consolidate and transform the R&I dimension of the Alliance into a sustainable, internationally visible structure for excellence in Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability."

Internal transformation – reforms, digitalisation, staff development

Societal transformation – regional ecosystems, industry, municipalities, citizens

Our vision is to reshape, consolidate and transform the Research and Innovation dimension of our European University into a sustainable, internationally recognized structure for excellence in Urban and Coastal Sustainability. EXCEED contributes to the implementation of ERA Actions 1-9, with a strong focus on Action 3 (Reforming Research Assessment) and Action 13 (Empowering Higher Education Institutions in the ERA). *In line with the Draghi Report (2024) on Europe's future competitiveness, EXCEED strengthens our excellence and innovation capacity.* Our vision is to position EU-CONEXUS as a *living laboratory* for testing and scaling excellence practices within the European Research Area, ensuring long-term sustainability, impact, and global visibility of the Alliance's research excellence.

Our Ambition

WHY

EU CONEXUS — European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability
- Non-uniform research assessment practices
- Limited recognition of diverse outputs
- Widening vs. non-widening disparities persist

- Uneven RMA professionalisation
- Weak Open Science integration
- Governance misaligned with ERA principles

- Research outputs not visible or findable to stakeholders
- No shared AI-based collaboration/matchmaking system

- Communities need accessible evidence tools
- Policymakers require data, models, prototypes
- Rising expectations for transparency and co-creation

WHAT

CoARA — Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment

Pilot CoARA-aligned institutional reforms
- Modernised, transparent research assessment
- Recognition of diverse research outputs
- New governance and evaluation models for widening HEIs

Build professional research management capacity
- Modular RMA training pathways
- Mentoring, peer-learning, certification
- ERA-aligned processes for HR, careers, and Open Science

Develop a digital research-innovation backbone
- RIIS 2.0 with CRIS/EOSC interoperability
- AI-assisted matchmaking (skills, labs, prototypes, datasets)
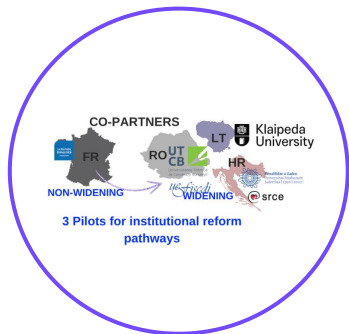- Dashboards for visibility, valorisation, and impact tracking

Strengthen science-society-industry interfaces
- Innovation Days & citizen-science
- City and industry engagement through Q-Helix partners
- Tools for accessible evidence and policy support

Reform → Upskill → Integrate → Digitise → Connect → Co-create

CO-PARTNERS

FR

RO UT CB

LT Klaipeda University

HR

@srce

NON-WIDENING

WIDENING

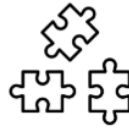3 Pilots for institutional reform pathways

Our Ambition

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European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability

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CO-PARTNERS

FR — La Rochelle Université
RO — UTCB Universitatea Tehnică de Construcții București
LT — Klaipeda University
HR — Sveučilište u Zadru Universitas Studiorum Jadertina | 1396 | 2002 |
srce

NON-WIDENING
WIDENING

3 Pilots for institutional reform pathways

Starting from the Romanian experience in the field of Civil Engineering

Our Ambition

HOW

Operationalise EU-CONEXUS Joint Research Institutes (JRIs) as Excellence Engines
Joint strategic agendas/governance models
Multidisciplinary seed-funding
Shared governance & interoperable procedure

Co-design institutional reforms with partners
Joint mapping, gap analysis, and baseline indicators
Mutual-learning workshops across widening & non-widening HEIs
Pilot & validate reforms in real institutions
Three widening universities act as testbeds (UTCB, UniZD, KU); Iterative refinement through stakeholder feedback

Deploy Digital Backbone & Activate Q-Helix Interfaces
RIIS 2.0 + AI-enabled matchmaking (skills, labs, prototypes); Innovation Days, citizen-science pilots, and policy-support tools

WHERE

CO-PARTNERS

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FR
NON-WIDENING

RO UTCB
Universitatea Tehnică de Construcții București
ue-fiscdi
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HR
Sveučilište u Zadru
Universitas Studiorum
Jadertina | 1396 | 2002
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3 Pilots for institutional reform pathways

Guidance for SCALE-UP

EU-CONEXUS
EXCEED
European Excellence

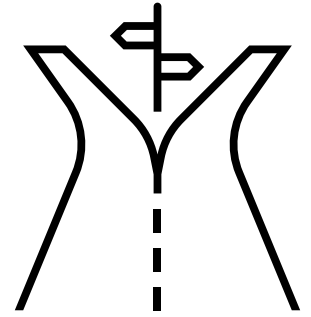**EU-CONEXUS as a LIVING LAB for other European Universities**

9 countries - 5 widening HEIs - 4 non-widening HEIs - 6 national agencies / government bodies - 7 municipalities & city authorities

Takeaways

A realistic perspective on institutional impact
- Focus on one clear institutional reform
- Choose the call that best matches that reform
- Define roles, time allocation, and ownership
- Plan what remains after the project
- Measure change in simple, realistic ways

WIDERA 2026–2027 opportunities for institutional transformation (practical mapping)

- **RMA professionalisation / services** → *Research Management Facility; ERA Research Managers* → *CoP, RM-Comp training, post-award routines*
- **Research careers & talent circulation** → *ERA actions on careers/talent; MSCA-relevant support* → *TNA, mentoring uptake, postdoc mobility pathways*
- **Institutional modernisation & assessment** → *ERA reforms / research assessment (CoARA-aligned)* → *Piloting ARA, governance, internal policies, incentives*

"The competitiveness agenda is not only about ambition, it is about delivery capacity. The strongest WIDERA proposals show realistic reform pathways, institutional ownership, and simple metrics that prove change beyond the project."

EU CONEXUS

Thank you!

Merci
Efcharistó
Gracias
Ačiū
Hvala
Mulțumesc
Danke