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The strong and united voice of universities
of science and technology in Europe

Design principles for long-term performance and impact assessment of European University Alliances

Position paper dated 15 June 2026

Introduction

CESAER, the strong and united voice of universities of science and technology in Europe, welcomes the European Commission's ongoing efforts to better understand and assess the long-term contribution of European Universities Alliances to the European Education Area and European Research Area, and to create the conditions for them to realise their full potential. As preparations advance for the next EU long-term budget, future Erasmus+, FP10, the European Competitiveness Fund and related initiatives under the Union of Skills, the European Research Area and the European Education Area, it is timely to reflect on how the added value of Alliances can be evidenced in a credible, proportionate and future-oriented way.

CESAER has consistently supported the European Universities initiative as one of the key instruments for long-term cooperation across education, research and innovation. In our 2024 [position](#) on Alliances, we emphasised that they should not be confined to a one-size-fits-all approach, but encouraged to pursue high-risk, high-gain experimentation as laboratories for knowledge development, learning across barriers and establishing good practice.

CESAER's 2026 [white paper](#) 'Inside European University Alliances' shows that universities of science and technology increasingly view Alliances as long-term institutional cooperation frameworks, aligned with the institutional strategies of their partners and built on growing trust among them. This provides a basis for mobilising cross-border knowledge ecosystems, strengthening talent pipelines, enabling access to shared infrastructures and progressively deepening R&I cooperation, while building on Alliances' established educational collaboration.

Realising this potential requires targeted support based on evidence and care in what is measured and how the evidence is used. The performance and impact of Alliances should not be measured through a reduced number of indicators or assessed through a one-size-fits-all model that overlooks differences in mission, maturity, institutional context and strategic focus. In this position we propose design principles that could be used for future monitoring of Alliances and show an example of their application to competitiveness without proposing a fixed indicator framework.

Design principles for long-term performance and impact assessment

Long-term performance and impact assessment should help clarify what European University Alliances make possible, what conditions help them succeed, and how their added value can be strengthened over time. It should recognise and promote learning, strategic improvement and contribute to policy learning, while remaining grounded in the public mission of universities and the European values behind the initiative. Any additional evidence burden should be proportionate, useful and aligned with the long-term objectives of the initiative. Assessment should not become a narrow compliance exercise that creates distorting incentives or fails to capture the contribution it is meant to assess. CESAER proposes the following design principles as a basis for further discussion on the potential future monitoring framework.

1. Purpose before indicators

Any future approach should first clarify why assessment is being undertaken, for whom, and how the evidence will be used. Assessment may support accountability, learning, strategic decision-making, future funding discussions or policy development at EU, national, Alliance and institutional level. These purposes are related, but not identical. Since the purpose, users and use of a possible future framework have not yet been clearly defined, CESAER does not propose a fixed set of indicators. Instead, this position identifies design principles that should guide the development of any future approach.

Starting with indicators before clarifying the purpose risks not only narrowing the discussion to what is easiest to measure, but also steering behaviour towards meeting the indicator rather than the underlying goal. Poorly chosen indicators can create incentives for activity that looks successful on paper, while doing little to strengthen the added value, quality or long-term impact of Alliances. Mobility provides a clear example. If the purpose is to assess Alliance added value, it is not sufficient to count overall institutional mobility or wider Erasmus+ mobility by Alliance members. Evidence should compare overall mobility, mobility involving Alliance partners and mobility outside the Alliance, and interpret the relationship between them. Otherwise, apparent growth may simply reflect the redirection of existing flows into intra-alliance routes, rather than additional impact. Indicators should therefore help show whether an intervention has generated genuine added value, such as quality improvement and creation of stronger interinstitutional bonds through directed mobility, rather than simply redistributing, relabelling or displacing existing activity and resources.

2. Added value before outputs

The central starting question should be what Alliances enable that individual universities, bilateral partnerships or short-term projects could not achieve alone. This requires attention to long-term changes such as stronger strategic cooperation and trust between institutions; more embedded cross-border education, research and innovation collaboration; stronger talent pipelines; institutional reforms in areas such as governance, recognition, quality assurance or digital systems; deeper engagement with industry, regions, public authorities and societal partners; and improved capacity to use shared infrastructures, expertise and support services across borders. Outputs can show what has been delivered, but they should be complemented where relevant and proportionate by evidence of what changed as a result and whether

this contributed to longer-term institutional development. This should rely as far as possible on existing reporting, documented examples and selected evidence of change, rather than creating a new burden to prove impact for every activity. Alliance-induced actions that bring systemic changes impacting institutional performance way beyond the alliance-collaboration should receive more attention.

3. Context before uniformity

Alliances create added value by bringing together different approaches, assets and expertise around shared goals. Differentiation in assessment should recognise this diversity, while remaining anchored in the shared European values and agreed principles of European cooperation that underpin the initiative. Alliances differ in mission, maturity, disciplinary profile, geographical composition, governance, national legal frameworks, institutional regulations and strategic focus. Differences also exist within Alliances, as member universities operate from different starting points and with different capacities, resources, roles, cultural backgrounds, and constraints. What works like a charm at one institution may not benefit the other universities within the same Alliance.

A credible assessment approach should therefore avoid assuming a single strictly standardised model. Evidence should be interpreted in context, taking account of institutional starting points, progress over time and, where appropriate, measures scaled to size, capacity or the groups the activity is intended to reach. Comparability should be limited to what is meaningfully comparable. Impact can still be evidenced, but through trajectories, contextualised indicators and explanations of change.

A future approach could include a focused and manageable common core at Alliance level, linked to each Alliance's strategy and shared priorities. Partner universities could contribute by mapping how their different roles, capacities and activities support these shared Alliance-level priorities, with the evidence aggregated and interpreted at Alliance level. Where relevant, evidence may be gathered at an institutional level to understand how Alliance-level added value is generated. However, interpretation and reporting should remain at Alliance level, avoiding public comparison or ranking of individual member universities.

4. Strategic continuity before rigid implementation

The assessment horizon of any future post-2027 monitoring framework should reflect the time required for holistic institutional change and sustained cross-border cooperation across education, research and innovation. At least a seven-year perspective, aligned with the EU long-term budget, would provide a more realistic timeframe. Within this horizon, Alliances could work through periodic work plans and mid-term reviews. This would allow them to adjust how they pursue agreed goals in response to new developments, evidence and challenges. The aim should be to preserve strategic continuity while enabling adaptive implementation. Alliances should be able to refine activities, discontinue approaches that do not deliver the expected added value, and redirect effort where stronger impact can be achieved. To empower excellence and enable Alliances to act as 'laboratories for success stories' pursuing high-risk, high-gain experimental approaches, refinement, discontinuation and redirection should be recognised as necessary and healthy signals that risks are genuinely being taken in pursuit of transformative outcomes.

5. Learning before compliance

Assessment should help identify what works, what does not, under which conditions, and what can be scaled, adapted or improved. For this to be credible, assessment must create the conditions for honest reporting. If assessment is perceived mainly as a compliance exercise, a basis for comparison or a direct factor in future funding decisions, Alliances may be discouraged from sharing unsuccessful trials, implementation barriers or activities that had to be adapted or discontinued. This would be counterproductive to the development of the initiative.

The European Commission can support this by clearly distinguishing learning-oriented assessment from accountability and funding decisions. While Alliances must remain accountable for the responsible use of public funding, learning-oriented assessment should provide space to discuss implementation barriers, adapted activities and discontinued approaches without penalising honest reporting. Aggregated and, where appropriate, anonymised findings could then be shared with the wider university community to support peer learning and the transfer of effective practices.

Alliances should therefore be incentivised to test new approaches, adapt or discontinue activities that do not deliver the intended results, and share these experiences as lessons learned. This would benefit the wider university community, including universities not participating in an Alliance, as well as other forms of institutionalised cooperation.

6. Interpretation before the KPI trap

Quantitative indicators can support transparency, comparability and longitudinal analysis, especially when they are well designed, responsibly interpreted and linked to the purpose of assessment. They are useful for monitoring performance, including activities delivered, participation levels, mobility patterns and funding participation. However, they cannot by themselves capture institutional transformation or long-term impact. Selected and proportionate qualitative evidence such as case studies, storytelling, counterfactuals, progress reports/examples and self-assessment are needed to explain how change happens, what role Alliance participation played, and what barriers remain. Such qualitative evidence should complement quantitative indicators by helping to explain progress towards expected outcomes and, where possible, longer-term impact, drawing as far as possible on existing documentation, case examples and documented experience rather than creating a new reporting layer.

7. Proportionality before new reporting layers

The monitoring framework should avoid additional reporting burden and build on evidence generated through the future programme architecture, including Erasmus+, FP10, ECF, EIT, national and regional partnership plans, institutional reporting and EHES tools. This should include cross-cutting activities across education, research and innovation, including where these are supported through different EU, national or regional instruments. Project-level reporting and longer-term evidence collection should be connected from the outset. A more integrated approach could reduce duplication, improve coherence and make evidence more useful for both Alliances and policymakers. It should be designed with the universities and Alliance teams that will use it in practice, including university practitioners responsible for coordination, reporting, institutional analytics, monitoring, strategy and leadership.

Applying the principles to competitiveness as an illustrative priority dimension

To illustrate how these principles could be applied in practice, this section considers competitiveness as one priority dimension for universities of science and technology. This does not imply that competitiveness is the only or primary purpose of assessment. Rather, it reflects an area where Alliances involving universities of science and technology can provide European added value by linking talent, research, innovation, infrastructures, industry-academia cooperation and wider knowledge ecosystems.

The table below offers a first illustration of possible contribution pathways. It is not a proposed measurement framework and should not be read as a final list of indicators, sub-indicators or data sources. Its purpose is to show how the design principles discussed above could apply to competitiveness and where further work may be needed.

Evidence needs context across all contribution pathways. Absolute volumes should not be read in isolation, but against institutional starting points, size, disciplinary profile, research intensity, partner roles, available resources and national or regional conditions. Where possible, evidence should also show whether activity is genuinely Alliance-enabled, rather than simply relabelled, redirected or displaced from existing activity. Perfect attribution will rarely be possible, but the interpretation should be clear and transparent.

For each pathway, evidence should be linked to the Alliance's agreed objectives and to the ways in which Alliance membership promotes development within partner universities, taking account of their different missions, starting points and institutional priorities. The focus should be on progress and change made possible through the Alliance, rather than on isolated activities.

Contribution pathway	What to look for	Examples of evidence
Talent and skills	Whether the Alliance strengthens talent development, circulation, retention and attraction in science, technology and strategic fields.	Enhanced collaboration across STEM/STEAM programmes, modules and learning pathways; doctoral, postdoctoral and industrial doctorate activities; micro-credentials and lifelong learning; international exposure of talent; mobility linked to strategic fields; links to skills needs, labour-market relevance and, where available, career outcomes; joint proposals and funded projects under relevant future EU instruments.
Research and innovation capacity	Whether the Alliance deepens cross-border, national and regional R&I cooperation and strengthens capacity in areas of strategic scientific and technological relevance of member universities.	R&I strategies or thematic research agendas; joint and individual alliance-enabled proposals and funded projects under relevant future EU instruments; impact on early-career researchers; cooperation between research support teams; documented new and reinforced research collaborations; co-publications linked to Alliance-enabled cooperation where relevant; contributions to relevant ERA policy aims, where relevant.

Contribution pathway	What to look for	Examples of evidence
Shared use of research and technology infrastructures	Whether the Alliance improves the capacity to share or jointly use laboratories, core facilities, testbeds, data platforms, support services and expertise across borders.	Cross-border access arrangements; joint mapping of facilities; documented use of laboratories, core facilities or testbeds by students, doctoral candidates, researchers or partners; shared technical expertise; joint training linked to infrastructure use; common support for research data, open science, ethics, and innovation. Systemic solutions for and beyond alliance collaboration.
Ecosystem and knowledge valorisation	Whether the Alliance strengthens links among universities, industry, SMEs, public authorities, regions and societal partners at Alliance level, connecting the ecosystems of its partners.	Challenge-based education or work-based learning with external partners; joint innovation projects; stories of knowledge valorisation and technology transfer, including patents, licensing, spin-offs or start-ups where relevant; entrepreneurship and start-up support; partnerships with regional innovation ecosystems; access to university infrastructures or testbeds for external partners.
Institutional transformation	Whether Alliance participation changes the capacity of member universities to act strategically across education, research, innovation and societal engagement.	Changes in institutional strategies, governance, internal funding, quality assurance, recognition, mobility procedures, digital systems, research support structures, staff roles, incentives or internal regulations.
Policy learning and framework conditions	Whether the Alliance identifies barriers and lessons relevant for European, national or regional policy and funding frameworks, and generates evidence on how some of these barriers could be addressed in practice.	Documented barriers to academic freedom, recognition, quality assurance, mobility, data sharing, infrastructure access, funding rules or legal frameworks; tested approaches to educational programmes, research careers, open science or knowledge valorisation; cases where Alliance experience informed institutional practice, national frameworks or EU programme design.

These examples should not be read as a checklist or scoreboard. Across all pathways, evidence should show not only what was delivered, but what changed, in what context, and what role the Alliance played. Evidence may need to be gathered at institutional level, particularly where institutional transformation is concerned, but interpretation and reporting should remain at Alliance level.

Before any indicators or sub-indicators are proposed, these pathways should be tested against data availability, attribution limits, reporting burden, unintended incentives and differences between Alliances and member universities. This should involve the universities and Alliance teams that would use the framework in practice.

High-level recommendations

We call on EU institutions to:

- design any future monitoring framework around clear-cut purposes, distinguishing accountability, learning, strategic steering and funding discussions.
- whenever possible, focus on the added value of Alliances, including what they enable beyond individual universities, bilateral partnerships or short-term projects.
- avoid a rigid one-size-fits-all KPI framework and allow Alliances to evidence progress in relation to their missions, maturity and strategic priorities.
- reflect on the Alliance's impact on the outside world, contributions of member universities to the Alliance potential, as well as the Alliance impact on its individual members.
- assess Alliances against long-term strategic objectives, supported by periodic work plans and mid-term reviews that enable adaptive implementation.
- clearly distinguish learning-oriented assessment from compliance and funding decisions, so that Alliances can report barriers, adapted activities and lessons learned honestly, to the benefit of the wider university community.
- combine quantitative evidence with qualitative explanations of institutional change, while avoiding indicators that create distorting incentives.
- connect project-level reporting and longer-term monitoring from the outset, building on evidence generated through Erasmus+, FP10, ECF, EIT, relevant national and regional partnership plans, institutional reporting and EHESO tools.
- allow Alliances to evidence cross-cutting activities across education, research and innovation, including where these are supported through different EU, national or regional instruments.
- design the monitoring framework with the universities and Alliance teams that would use it in practice.

Conclusion

Long-term performance and impact assessment of European University Alliances should support learning, strategic improvement and sustained investment. It should help clarify what Alliances make possible, what conditions help them succeed, and how their added value can be strengthened over time with respect to their unique character and institutional autonomy, where the success of the initiative is perceived through the lens of a collection of success stories of individual regions, universities, departments, faculties and various groups of internal and external stakeholders.

A credible monitoring framework must therefore remain flexible, proportionate and mission sensitive, while remaining anchored in the shared European values and principles underpinning the initiative. It should avoid narrow KPI logic and support coherent long-term funding and programme architecture across education, research and innovation, recognising the diversity of Alliances and the added value created through cooperation across different institutional strengths.

CESAER stands ready to contribute the expertise of universities of science and technology to explore and elaborate how such an approach can be developed for the benefit of Alliances, their member universities and Europe's wider knowledge ecosystem.

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This document can be referenced using: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20692837>

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