



Engagement Strategy

Addressing challenges and issues of
Engaged research

31/08/2024

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ABBREVIATIONS

ERUA or Alliance: *The Alliance grouping the eight partners working together on education, research and innovation plus the Universities of Konstanz and Roskilde which remain full partner in Re:ERUA but associated partners in the ERUA project funded under Erasmus +;*

ERUA1/ ERUA first phase: *European Reform University Alliance. Project funded in the framework of the Erasmus+ - European University initiative programme. It represents the first educational pillar of the Alliance. We refer to the first phase in funding under Erasmus +, in the period 2020 – 2023, with the same consortium as Re:ERUA.*

ERUA Erasmus+/ ERUA2 : *European Reform University Alliance. Project funded in the framework of the Erasmus+ - European University initiative programme. It represents the educational pillar of the Alliance. **We refer to the second phase in funding under Erasmus +, from November 2023 onward with new partners, while Universities of Konstanz and Roskilde remain associated partners***

Re:ERUA: *Research and Engagement for the European Reform University Alliance. Complementary project funded through the Horizon 2020 – SwafS programme. It represents the research pillar of ERUA;*

RRI : *Responsible Research and Innovation.*

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1. Introduction

Re:ERUA's Engagement Strategy is the result of three years of discussions on shared reformist perspectives across Re:ERUA's different WPs, especially during the expert group meetings. The focus of Re:ERUA's teams is to provide ERUA2 with the practical tools they have developed over the years, together with Re:ERUA's expertise and strategic approach, to further extend the benefits of engaged research for years to come.

It should be noted, as highlighted in other documents, that the European Reform University Alliance has undergone significant changes in terms of partners and funding. Given the profound changes in the consortium, which is now funded solely by ERASMUS+ now that the Re:ERUA project has come to an end, the purpose of this document is not to provide a ready-made roadmap for an engaged research strategy in the absence of additional SWAFS funding. Rather, it aims to inform the Alliance as it grapples with the challenging question of how and whether the acceleration, ranking, hierarchy and projectification of research can be reconciled with Re:ERUA's commitment to engaged research from an ethics of care and epistemic justice perspective.

Building on Re:ERUA's key achievements, this strategy aims to guide the development of the Alliance's long-term strategy by offering a set of recommendations aimed at creating spaces for epistemic justice through practical interventions to address wider inequalities (Anderson, 2012; Sen, 2009). These recommendations address the critical question of whether the Alliance's engaged research agenda advances or diminishes epistemic democracy and social justice. As research is one of the three core pillars of ERUA's long-term strategy, Re:ERUA's project team will submit this document to the newly established Steering Committee of the Alliance.

2. Vision

In today's academic environment, there is a growing expectation for researchers to involve non-academic audiences in the production of knowledge. While this approach aligns with efforts to produce counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge, it also presents a number of inner contradictions. The rise of the engagement agenda coincides with market-driven reforms in higher education, conducive to increased job insecurity and deteriorating working conditions. There is growing concern that policies promoting engaged research may inadvertently reinforce nefarious aspects such as cut-throat competition, selectivity, and hierarchy—rather than dismantle them.

Re:ERUA seeks to navigate these complexities by promoting an engaged research agenda that genuinely democratizes knowledge production, challenges existing power structures, and contributes to improving social justice. This vision is fundamentally rooted in a commitment to epistemic justice and care, which guarantees that research not only engages a diversity of external stakeholders but also actively benefits them.

2.1. Examining ERUA's unique position within established Policy Frameworks

Drawing from its key learnings and achievements (see Appendix for details), Re:ERUA's first response is that engaged research is not a novel concept and practice. Re:ERUA universities have shown that they can leverage substantial knowledge on conducting responsible research as many researchers successfully integrate collaborative research methodologies to enhance reflexivity and responsibility awareness. The Alliance is invited to further extend this response by acknowledging that engaged research stems from a rich continuum of pre-existing traditions inherited from feminist and activist research, user-led and participatory approaches with a long history of dialogue.

At the same time, Re:ERUA operates within EU policy frameworks, particularly those based on the Quintuple Helix paradigm of collaboration. This paradigm promoted by the [H2020 Science with and for Society \(SWAFS\) Programme](#) is consistent with the Agreement on Research and Innovation in Europe, which underscores the importance of active citizen participation in the European Research Area to improve societal engagement, and with the [Horizon Europe Programme Guide \(2021-2027\)](#). European policy discourse views co-construction and co-creation as a broad solution to many issues, emphasising its economic benefits like growth, competitiveness, and added value.

However, European research policy discourse tends to emphasize the opportunities for engagement provided by co-creation, while overlooking critical aspects such as representation, inclusive recruitment, agency in decision-making, accountability, and transparency. When co-creation is individualized and discretionary, participation is limited to those who are willing and able to contribute, potentially leading to a decline in equitable participation¹.

Despite its alignment with Horizon 2020 Swafs programme, Re:ERUA aims to transcend its related policies and critically address the power dynamics and structures that persist within the Quintuple Helix framework. One additional drawback is that the emphasis on innovation often aligns with market-driven objectives, rather than addressing societal issues and inequalities. Re:ERUA addresses the limitations

¹ Ruess, A. K., Müller, R., & Pfothenhauer, S. M. (2023). Opportunity or responsibility? Tracing co-creation in the European policy discourse. *Science and Public Policy*, 50(3), 433-444.

of the current participatory policy agenda while simultaneously seeking to reform it and invites university partners to embrace the following challenges:

- Superficial participation of external stakeholders, i.e when engaged research is employed to advance institutional objectives rather than to democratise the production of knowledge. Non-academic contributions are acknowledged but not fully integrated into the research process, and sometimes invisibilized².
- Power Dynamics: The collaborative models that are often advocated, often driven by political decisions, often fail to take into account the power dynamics and hierarchies that exist within and between different social actors. This could result in the reinforcement of preexisting inequalities rather than the active pursuit of their resolution.
- Economic outcomes are prioritised over the resolution of underlying social concerns and inequalities in market-driven objectives that typically emphasise innovation. Engaged research's transformative ability may be compromised by such emphasis.
- Impact measurements tend to prioritise quantifiable outcomes that are consistent with market-driven success indicators, such as economic advantages and citation numbers, rather than significant societal transformations leading to the sole quantitative assessment of research outcomes.

² Ejrnæs M. et al. (2023), *'Best practice' noir: The Danish infrastructure for societally engaged research problematized through success stories*. Paper presented at ERUA Summit 2023, Roskilde Denmark,

Markova G. & Ganey A. (2023), *Strengths-based action research as a tool for Roma integration in Bulgaria. The role of a university*. Paper presented at ERUA Summit 2023, Roskilde Denmark

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Pierosara S. (2024). *Taking Care of Epistemic Injustices in Research Context*, Paper presented at ERUA Summit 2024, Mykolas Romeris University.

3. Recommendations

3.1. Public and Community Engagement

Re:ERUA prioritises substantive and inclusive engagement with society. The Alliance has established research structures and mechanisms to guarantee the full integration and acknowledgement of non-academic partners' expertise into the research process. This includes equitable collaboration, which involves the active participation of community members from the project's inception on and the full integration of their contributions into the research outputs. However, as demonstrated in **Re:ERUA Online Handbook on Innovation and Societal Engagement (D.3.3)** and **the Collaborative Guide: Exploring Dilemmas for Societally Engaged Best Practices (D3.6a)**, the full integration of non-academic contributors in engaged research initiatives presents dilemmas and is both challenging and not always appropriate or even possible. Equitable collaboration remains an ongoing discussion topic among experienced, engaged researchers.

Define a distinct ERUA vision for engaged research

Drawing from Re:ERUA's RRI model, to its research endeavours and its expert group contributions on epistemic justice, ERUA should address the distinction between positive community engagement initiatives and those that undermine academic freedom and perpetuate power structures while fostering epistemic injustice. By clearly asserting ERUA's transformative and forward-looking role, amplifying the voices of the marginalised, and adhering to epistemic justice, ERUA can safeguard knowledge production from nefarious power plays. ERUA should:

- Design a roadmap for workshops, seminars, summerschools and conferences dedicated to the refinement of **Re:ERUA Charter of the Common Research Framework Program (D.2.5)**.
- Advocate for genuine and equitable community partnerships to transcend tokenistic engagement of external stakeholders.
- Issues of racism, gender discrimination, LGBTQphobia, ableism, and classism within ERUA research environment should be clearly addressed in ERUA's long term strategy through accountability mechanisms ensuring marginalized partners feel secure, respected, and appreciated within ERUA's research environment.
- Discuss the design and implementation of transparent agreements to delineate the equitable distribution of research benefits, including the equitable financial compensation of all stakeholders involved.

- Encourage accountability and transparency in the dissemination of research processes and findings: workshops should be provided to external collaborators for their effective access and use of research data and findings.

These activities should be further developed through the annual approval of the mentioned Charter(D.2.5), which establishes the principles of engaged research and introduces the values underpinning ERUA's collaborative initiatives. This Charter was approved by the Board of Rectors (including the new members) in January 2024. ERUA2's WP3 (under Erasmus+) has now taken on the responsibility to further develop, amend, and ensure compliance with the Charter, in alignment with Re:ERUA's guidelines.

Acknowledge and encourage the contributions and expertise of non-academic partners

ERUA is invited to acknowledge and encourage the contributions and expertise of non-academic partners and advocate for external stakeholders' training, whenever relevant, and consider putting in place enduring support systems in order to guarantee their full participation in research. These measures are contingent upon the existence of long-term support structures. ERUA should:

- Provide training sessions on research methodologies, data analysis, and other relevant skills to empower marginalised partners and enhance their capacity to participate in research, provided that it is consistent with their empowerment, if relevant and requested (i.e. through Re:ERUA's **Training modules on Gendered innovation) (D.4.6)**.
- Consider the feasibility of establishing forums for community stakeholders to exchange their experiences and knowledge, thereby fostering a sense of community and mutual learning through ERUA's research clusters.
- Ensure that support structures are sustained beyond the duration of individual initiatives.
- Enhance the existing digital systems, such as the ERUA's research portal, to facilitate deeper mutual understanding between ERUA's researchers and society for academia to collaboratively address new scientific challenges that serve society and promote social justice.

3.2. Flexible and sustainable research structures for societal engagement

Sustainable funding

The Alliance should commit to securing sustainable funding and research positions to support engaged research in the long run. Achieving this requires significant institutional and cultural changes to promote inclusive research practices that value diverse expertise and participation. Flexibility in project timelines and administrative support systems is essential to accommodate the evolving needs of engaged research. Long-term partnerships with communities must be maintained, ensuring that engagement continues beyond one-shot projects. ERUA should:

- Advocate for the creation of specific funding streams within national and EU research programs that are dedicated to engaged research projects. ERUA should ensure that these initiatives receive long-term support with enhanced administrative assistance for researchers activities for fundraising, targeting early career, marginalized and non traditional researchers.
- Re:ERUA advocates for ERUA's participation in the upcoming WIDERA work programme 2025 to further develop its engaged research agenda (i.e. marginalised researchers topics, reform of research assessment).

Flexibility in research initiatives

ERUA is invited to acknowledge that community-engaged research projects necessitate additional time to build trust and adapt to the changing requirements of community partners. To guarantee that the research quality is not jeopardised, advocate for the incorporation of flexibility into research project proposals to facilitate iterative development and feedback cycles in response to community feedback. ERUA should:

- Establish practical timelines that take into consideration the time required to establish trust and relationships with community partners.
- Incorporate buffer periods to account for unforeseen delays or additional engagement activities, thereby guaranteeing that the research activities remain responsive to the requests and/or interests of the community.
- Participate in timeline discussions with community stakeholders to ensure that project milestones are compatible with their schedules and priorities.

Administrative and management support structures

ERUA is invited to advocate for administrative support structures that are designed to be proactive and responsive to engagement research initiatives, building from the existing ERUA Research support Network. ERUA should:

- Support the professionalization of research administrators and best practice related to responsible research and societal engagement. In this regard, the **Whitepaper on best practices in Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) (D.2.6)** provides an accurate snapshot of the current RRI landscape in research support, along with appropriate recommendations to assist universities, and specifically their research services, to increase their responsiveness to engaged and participative research challenges.
- Research administrators and university decision-makers should commit to simplifying logistical, financial processes and resolving regulatory issues specific to the challenges of community-engaged research.

3.3. Advocacy and Policy Change

Engaged research policy

ERUA should actively promote policies that support engaged research, focusing on social justice and the democratization of knowledge, including advocating for financial support and resources. This would include the organization of regular meetings and roundtable discussions with policymakers at local, national, and EU levels to advocate for policy changes that support engaged research. ERUA should:

- Consider partnering with other university alliances to develop joint position papers and policy briefs, advocating for EU policies that prioritize social innovation over market-driven objectives. Strategic partnerships with alliances (i.e. Forums of European University Alliances) may amplify advocacy efforts.
- Develop an ecosystem for both ERUA and policy organizations and consider developing an interface model between ERUA and policy-organizations by creating a collaborative ecosystem for ERUA members and policy organizations to access opportunities and strengthen evidence-informed policy making.
- Advocate for the enrolment of University and civil society leaders as ambassadors for engaged research. Their involvement in a series of

organized speaking opportunities and targeted interactions with policy makers should prove necessary to highlight ERUA's engaged research initiatives and keep them on their respective agenda³.

- Evaluate the significance of ERUA's engaged research processes and findings within the EU's agenda to generate scientific knowledge as defined within the policy paper "[Futures of Science for Policy in Europe: Scenarios and Policy Implications](#)"⁴. This paper serves as a call to action for European researchers to engage in research that actively informs and shapes policy, emphasizing the need for policy-making to consider not only empirical data but also ethical and normative dimensions.
- Establish a working group to develop research assessment standards for engaged research indicators to reflect the principles of care, epistemic justice, and transformation in the research process. This group could be accountable for the designing of indicators which incorporate frequently disregarded qualitative and relational aspects of engaged scholarship. Methodological decolonisation, participatory action research, epistemic justice, and relational ethics should serve as the basis for such standards. From a critical and reflexive standpoint, the new ERUA indicators would underscore the long-term impact of research, the disruption of systemic oppressions, and the depth of engagement.
- Address the potential connection between **COARA and ERUA**. Targeted meetings on the experiences of COARA signatory universities should be held to discuss the possible inclusion of ERUA's RRI and societal engagement perspective in existing COARA working groups and the enhancement of Re:ERUA's Open Science achievements.

³ Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) - <https://upen.ac.uk/>

⁴ European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Sarvaranta, L., Bravo-Biosca, A., De Marchi, B., Weber, M. et al., *Futures of science for policy in Europe – Scenarios and policy implications*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/121857>

3.4. Assisting Early Career Researchers (ECRs) with navigating competing academic models

Research produced in partnership with external stakeholders facing specific challenges entails a significant amount of time invested in maintaining relationships of trust. It also requires researchers to spend time on achieving the outputs that have been prioritized by the partners. Re:ERUA fully acknowledges the obstacles encountered by early career researchers (ERCs) involved in engaged research initiatives and invites the Alliance to further recognize ECRs specific career challenges. The risk is to penalize young engaged researchers who prioritize investing time in complex relationships and achieving the priorities and outputs identified by their partners. ERUA should:

- Formulate policies which guarantee that ECRs are not unduly overwhelmed by the requirements of active research. ERUA ought to establish explicit policies that acknowledge the supplementary time and exertion needed for field research. Ensure that institutional policies explicitly acknowledge engaged research and incorporate it into performance reviews and promotional criteria.
- Allocate dedicated funding and resources and tools for Early career researchers who are actively committed in research partnerships. This encompasses allowances, subsidies, and the opportunity to hire research assistants.
- Establish specialised mentorship initiatives that match ECRs with experienced engaged scholars and external experts who can offer guidance on effective research methodologies and professional growth in and outside academia.
- Create extensive training programs on methodologies of engaged research, ethical considerations, and sustainable career development. Subjects should encompass the development of skills to build and maintain long-term relationships with community partners during each phase of the planning process, from identifying the issues under study to collaborating on the development of implementable proposals and the development of skills to identify and address power dynamics in partnerships.
- Guarantee that contributions to active research are officially acknowledged in academic assessments and advancements in relation with COARA and the design of engaged research related indicators for research assessment.

Additional measures to guarantee job stability and eliminate precarity among ECRs. ERUA should:

- Consider enhancing job security and securing funding by promoting the transition from short-term fixed contracts to long-term contracts or permanent positions for young scholars working on long term participatory research projects.
- Whenever possible, ensure that funding for engaged research projects includes arrangements for secured employment contracts for ECRs. This entails advocating for change in funding agency policies to provide adaptable schedules that enable the establishment of significant, enduring community collaborations.

4. Concluding remarks

ERUA stands at a pivotal moment where its commitment to engaged research can significantly shape the future of knowledge production and societal engagement. By embedding Re:ERUA values and principles at the heart of its strategic vision, the Alliance has the potential to create a more inclusive, equitable, and socially responsive academic ecosystem.

Addressing the challenges of engaged research requires systemic changes at multiple levels within the ERUA academic ecosystem. ERUA's research strategy should take into account the present document. Re:ERUA's recommendations go beyond the mere engagement with the public. They call for a critical reassessment of what it truly means to do so. The ultimate objective of engaged research should be the empowerment of communities, ensuring a legacy of research collaborations that extend well beyond the conclusion of individual projects.

We recommend to foster relationships grounded in mutual respect, shared authority, and the co-creation of goals and outcomes, and by respecting the knowledge and experiences that everyone contributes toward creating solutions to social issues, ERUA can build a foundation for epistemic justice and establish on this ground a common long-term vision.

ERUA is well-positioned to advance its engaged research agenda, fostering social innovation and contributing to the broader European landscape of engaged research.

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Appendix - Introduction of Re:ERUA Key Achievements

1. Digital Tools and Resources (WP2 and WP6): ERUA's Research Portal is a comprehensive digital platform developed to enhance research collaboration and visibility across the Alliance. This portal includes:

- **Research Unit Listings:** Detailed profiles of research units within the Alliance, categorized by relevant ERC panels, scientific fields, key infrastructures, and partner organizations.
- **Researchers Directory:** A comprehensive directory of researchers, organized by their respective universities and research units, making it easier to identify expertise and foster collaboration.
- **Advertisement Board for Research Collaborations:** research collaboration opportunities are displayed, allowing for more dynamic and effective partnerships.

2. RRI and Societal Engagement (WP3): The Alliance has prioritized Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) across multiple initiatives, resulting in several key deliverables :

- Mapping on Innovation and Societal Engagement research projects across the Alliance (online handbook)
- Guideline on collaboration for societal engagement and social innovation and recommendations Format (Report)
- Tools for Research collaboration dilemmas (Handbook and platform) This resource addresses common dilemmas faced during research collaborations, offering practical solutions and a platform for researchers to navigate these challenges, thus supporting the ethical and responsible conduct of research

3. Support for Open Science (WP5): To advance open science practices, the Alliance has implemented several initiatives, reinforcing the principles of transparency, accessibility, and public engagement:

- **Monthly Open Science Meet-Ups:** Regular sessions are held on specific topics, with approximately 11 sessions conducted annually. These meet-ups serve as forum for discussing best practices, challenges, and new developments in open science.
- **Open Science Courses:** Both basic and advanced courses have been made available on the ERUA website, providing essential training for researchers at all levels on open science methodologies and practices.
- **Open Science Ambassadors:** Each partner university has appointed open science ambassadors, who are responsible for promoting and disseminating open science practices within their institutions. These ambassadors play a crucial role in embedding open science principles into the research culture of the Alliance.

- Research Data Management community study report: based on a quality research study asking researchers and other stakeholders from all universities what RDM tools and services they need to establish research collaborations.

4. Gender Innovation Initiatives (WP4):

The Alliance has made considerable progress in promoting gender equality and addressing gender-based challenges through a series of educational initiatives:

- Online Modules: Four comprehensive modules have been developed, focusing on :
 - Gender equality principles.
 - Gender inequality within the context of the family and society.
 - Challenges related to gender inequality in the workplace.
 - Gender inequality in political participation and representation.
- Interactive Workshops: Two workshops were conducted, focusing on gender inequality in the workplace and the challenges faced by women in decision-making positions.
- Gender Innovation final Conference
- Gender Action Plan : Re :ERUA worked on a joint Action plan on Gender dimension

5. Strategic Documents and Frameworks (WP2 and WP4):

Strategic planning and alignment across the Alliance have been supported by the development of key documents:

- Charter on a Common Research Framework (D2.5): Validated by the ERUA Board of Rectors in January 2024, this Charter establishes a unified research framework across the Alliance.
- Action Plans for Re-Skilling and Up-Skilling: Led by the University of the Aegean, these plans are designed to address the evolving needs of researchers and ensure that they have the skills necessary to engage in responsible and innovative research.
- White Paper on Best Practices in RRI (D.2.6): This white paper documents and disseminates best practices in Responsible Research and Innovation across the Alliance.
- Engagement Strategy : The current document is based on the outcomes of the Alliance's four work packages (WPs) and will guide future commitments and activities, ensuring long-term alignment with RRI principles.

6. Administrative and Research Support (WP2):

ERUA's Research Support Network, launched in 2023, provides a structured platform for enhancing collaboration and capacity building across the Alliance's administrative and research support teams:

During its pilot year, the network achieved significant outcomes, including the successful collection of **RRI-inspired practices** in research support, leading to the publication of a **white paper**. Additionally, the network supported grant applications,

provided a successful ERC mock interview session, and facilitated improved communication through regular newsletters. The network's coordination has now transitioned to Viadrina University, ensuring its continued role in supporting future clustering activities.

7. Collaborative and Solidarity Efforts (WP1 and WP2):

The Alliance has demonstrated its commitment to inclusivity and solidarity through several key initiatives:

- **Post-Doctoral Fellowship for Ukrainian Researchers:** In response to the Ukraine crisis, the Alliance established a fellowship to support Ukrainian researchers, reflecting the RRI principle of inclusivity and support for scholars at-risk.
- **Support for Early Career Researchers:** Through a targeted initiatives, two career researchers have been able to use their projects as a foundation for engaging in new research collaboration.
- **Expert Group Sessions and Scientific Council Guidance:** Re :ERUA has facilitated sessions with expert groups and continued to receive strategic advice from the Scientific Council.

8. Publications and Dissemination:

Dissemination of research and educational materials is a key priority for the Alliance, ensuring that knowledge generated within ERUA is accessible to a broad audience :

- **Mapping and Guidance for Shared Research Infrastructures:** Action Plan and Procedures for Equipment Sharing Implementation - In addition to showcasing our research units and their equipment, Re:ERUA has focused on implementing and sharing equipment across the alliance.
- **Open Access Publications:** Research and educational materials have been widely disseminated through platforms such as Liber Quarterly, ResearchGate, and ZENODO. These publications include resources on open science, gender innovation, workshops, and handbooks on research collaboration.
- **High-Profile Dissemination Events:** The Alliance has organized events such as international summits, online versions of the Night of Ideas, a Swafs Event in Brussels, and summits to engage the broader community and share the Alliance's achievements.
- **ERUA's Website:** It represents the central hub for dissemination. ERUA's website has been instrumental in centralizing resources ERUA/Re:ERUA and ensuring that the built expertise reaches as wide an audience as possible.