



## **A Roadmap for European Universities Policy Recommendation to Achieve HEI Sustainability: The Case of INVEST EU Alliance**

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### **Abstract**

The European Union (EU) has emphasized the value of higher education, research, and innovation as engines for the continued socioeconomic and cultural advancement of Europe on several occasions. The European Universities Initiative (EUI), one of the most recent policy initiatives by the European Commission (EC) aims at advancing this agenda, via transnational collaborations of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to find new strategies for fostering European scientific excellence. This effort provides an administrative answer to the goals of European policy in terms of higher education, research, and innovation. This paper analyzes the potential benefits and risks the EUI alliances might face along four dimensions: their internal coordination, their methods of resolving conflicts, the commitment of member universities, and the cultural characteristics of the alliances. It is based on interviews with individuals holding key leadership and management roles in five member universities. We provide the case of INVEST EUI alliance as a complete case study for all the governmental, educational, structural, and financial challenges faced to draw a roadmap that can be used as policy recommendation for EU.

**Keywords:** European, European, university, initiative, higher, education, INVEST, policy, structural, reform, governance, sustainability

## Introduction

Collaborations between Alliances in higher education have been a significant feature since the mid 1980's. (Pietsch, 2013) uses organizational and management studies to classify international inter-organizational cooperation, focusing on size, scope, nature of integration, and intensity. The EUI initiative is positioned as a new regional scheme in this context of heightened collaboration. Moreover, the European educational landscape is undergoing a transformation, with the model and role of European universities being rethought. The concept of EUI aims to connect universities' resources to pressing social, civic, and ethical problems. HEIs play a significant role in the development of their regions, contributing to intellectual and civic progress. The European social model focuses on sustainable development that combines economic, social, and cultural dynamism with cohesion, equity, inter-cultural and environmental protection, people's quality of life, and recognition of diversity. Universities can act as a stabilizing influence in local economies and actively contribute to regional development, improving regional innovation, business growth, and social equality. For that reason, the INVEST EUI was formed to resolve the major issue of European regional development and sustainability.

INVEST has been a major EUI actor playing a leadership role in problem-solving and serving as a model of civic behavior for society. Initiatives and declarations, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasize the need to integrate education for sustainable development into all levels of education. Within this concept, one of INVEST's goals is to unite a new generation of creative, collaborative Europeans who can work across fields, languages, and borders to address Europe's major regional development and sustainability concerns and the lack of resources needed to establish a European Education Area. This would improve the global competitiveness of European universities by enabling students to complete their degrees by combining study abroad experiences in different EU nations.

However, INVEST, like all the similar EUI coalitions, faces a formidable challenge: because they will need to promote institutional transformation and research excellence, they need to establish a framework of processes/policies towards institutionalization. This framework can be used as a valuable tool for the rest of alliances that will help EUIs towards institutional reform (Maassen, Stensaker and Rosso, 2022).

We provide in this paper a roadmap tailored with all the necessary policy recommendation for EU aiming in ensuring the sustainability of

INVEST after its completion. This includes an organized and structural set of required actions and a set of policy recommendations with the objective of maximizing the impact of the INVEST project in support of relevant EU strategies. Specifically we aim to achieve a wide spectrum of significantly critical objectives such as: (a) a standard quality assurance model, (b) an EU-spanned accreditation policy for all universities by means of stipulating cooperation between EU Member States on educational fields, (c) creating innovation in an educational context, (d) promoting quality educational leadership in scientific disciplines and (e) contributing to raising standards for higher education services (Arnaldo Valdés and Gómez Comendador, 2022). The roadmap identifies challenges and necessary policy recommendations for decision makers to use INVEST educational model in support of European Strategies. We first present the current European educational scene background in terms of EUI and the relevant European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in section II. In section III we layout the vision and the strategic pillars and priorities based on which the INVEST alliance is designed and implemented. Moreover, we present the internal and external environment challenges of INVEST in its process of institutionalization in section IV, whereas section V provide the planning as a roadmap method and the policy recommendations respectively.

## **Background**

### **A. *The European Universities Initiative***

The European Union (EU) has set a goal to create a European Education Area by 2025, with higher education being a key focus area for collaboration with EU Member States. By 2030, at least 45% of 25–34-year-olds should obtain a higher education qualification. The European Council called on Member States, the Council, and the Commission to strengthen strategic partnerships across the EU and encourage the emergence of sixty "European Universities" by 2024.

The EUI aims to create "Universities of the Future" that promote European values and identity and revolutionize the quality and competitiveness of European higher education. However, achieving this positive systemic impact depends on several critical issues, including: (a) uniting Europe's higher education and research landscape, (b) providing sufficient and sustainable funding, (c) overcoming legal and administrative barriers around cross-border collaboration, and (d) developing the research dimension of the initiative.

This initiative provides an opportunity to revive the social dimension of European integration and focus on education as an area of collaboration. For Europe's universities, it offers a chance to build on their diversity and connect excellence in different domains across the continent, creating critical

mass, increasing visibility, and further developing capacity in learning, teaching, research, and innovation. Furthermore, the initiative presents an opportunity to push forward reforms at systemic and institutional levels and address legal and administrative issues hindering cross-border collaboration, such as recognition of diplomas and study periods abroad or accreditation of joint programs.

### **B. *Relevant EHEA priorities***

The EUI is strongly integrated with the core principles of the European Higher Education policies which make up the higher education transformation agenda (Brooks and Rensimer, 2023), therefore its success requires associated developments in other areas such as:

- *Flexible, inclusive learning opportunities*: The Commission is working to develop a common definition and European standards for micro-credentials, which are qualifications acquired through a short, transparently assessed course or module. These qualifications can be completed on-site, online, or blended formats. The Commission aims to ensure quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition, and portability. Micro-credentials are offered by higher and vocational education and training institutions, as well as private organizations, and are particularly useful for individuals seeking to build on their knowledge without completing a full higher education program.
- *Relevant and high-quality higher education*: Quality assurance in higher education boosts confidence and promotes excellence. Institutions should have a rigorous internal system, evaluated by external agencies. However, legal, financial, and administrative restrictions limit their freedom, and national governments maintain control over funding.
- *Effective and efficient higher education*: The EU's strategic framework for education and training emphasizes the need for adequate funding, flexible governance, and effective quality assurance policies in higher education. The renewed EU agenda for higher education emphasizes the importance of human and financial resources, incentives, and reward systems. Staffing levels in Europe's higher education system need improvement, including improved working conditions, better training, and recognition of teaching and research excellence.
- *Social inclusion and connectivity*: Higher education must address Europe's social and democratic challenges by ensuring inclusivity and community connection. Social groups least represented in higher education lack basic skills, independent learning experience, and understanding of higher education. Disadvantaged and

underrepresented students, along with gender segregation, need flexible study options and recognition of prior learning to make higher education more accessible.

- *Mobility and cooperation in higher education*: Mobility is crucial for students to develop valuable skills and expand their horizons. Over 90% of young Europeans consider it important, and European ministers aim to double the proportion of students completing a study or training period abroad to 20% by 2020 (Brooks and Waters, 2022). Support for mobility is a core focus of Erasmus+, the European Union's education and training program (Glass and Cruz, 2023). Employers look for transferrable skills gained from mobility experiences, and over 70% of former Erasmus+ students report better career understanding upon returning (Nada and Legutko, 2022). Erasmus+ cooperation projects prepare universities for digital transformation and increase social inclusion and non-discrimination in higher education.
- *European student card*: This initiative plans to create an online one-stop-shop through the Erasmus+ Mobile App, enabling students to manage all administrative steps related to their mobility period, promoting student participation in educational and cultural activities, and achieving a European Education Area by 2025 (Grek and Russell, 2023).

### **The INVEST alliance: vision and strategies**

INVEST aims to integrate European universities for international, cross-disciplinary, and multilingual studies, addressing global challenges for sustainable regional development. It provides a unique platform for enhancing interactions, encouraging cultural and social dialogues, and fostering civic engagement and entrepreneurial mindset. Its vision is based on four strategic pillars:

- *Strategic pillar (1) Competitive education and valuable learning outcomes*: The pillar aims to provide competitive education and training opportunities for European experts in agriculture, entrepreneurship, regional development, and environmental protection, ensuring they can effectively implement their knowledge, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- *Strategic pillar (2) Collective excellent research and innovation*: INVEST aims to foster a knowledge-based society through intensive interaction between education, research, and innovation, fostering high-level European innovation and research. It builds human capacity and promotes staff competence development, creating a joint community of practice.

- *Strategic pillar (3) High mobility level beyond Europe*: To achieve internationalization, a significant increase in mobility of students, academics, staff, and researchers from and outside Europe is necessary, considering physical, blended, and virtual forms of mobility.
- *Strategic pillar (4) Networking as the platform for future education and research*: The community of students, academics, and researchers, will benefit from effective cooperation with public authorities and the professional society in the long term.

INVEST focuses on acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes for SDGs incorporating entrepreneurial business, leadership, independent thinking, civic consciousness, and responsibility, with the following focal points:

- *Focal point A: Water, Energy Food and Environment Nexus*: Climate proof regional development; Sustainable, smart agriculture, Aquaculture, Food security, Food safety; Water resources management; Energy transition; Green energies; Natural and cultural heritage.
- *Focal point B: Quality of Life*: Education and capacity building; Urban-rural relationship; Inter-European citizenship; Ensuring and quality of public services; Life-long learning.
- *Focal point C: Entrepreneurship*: Circular-/ Bio-Based Economy; Job creation and human capital management; New business models and smart technologies; Regional sustainability driven capitalism and bio-based industries.

The INVEST alliance aims to strengthen cooperation across various levels of organizations and areas of activity in education provision. Seven prerequisites are defined to be fulfilled, including: (1) a governance structure, (2) a joint European accreditation system, (3) joint degree programs, (4) mobility of staff and students, (5) a joint vision on education and pedagogy, (6) living labs, and (7) learning communities.

The idea of INVEST governance structure aims to strengthen cooperation across organizations and areas of activity, building on complementary strengths of partners. The joint INVEST Accreditation Framework for degree courses is developed, incorporating best practices from different accreditation models. A common Quality Assurance System has been established, focusing on student and stakeholder engagement.

Joint European degrees have been designed and will operated starting in the academic year 2023-2024. These degrees have been designed to link the vocational training to higher education. The EDUC8EU tool, (Iatrellis, Kameas and Fitsilis, 2018) will support this operation by providing

information on individual study preferences and study choices. Blended mobility along with all administration, registration and education services will be implemented through the INVEST Virtual Campus. Furthermore, additional promotional educational elements include the winter and summer schools which are dedicated in exhausting specialized topics in regional sustainability and development.

The new competence-based pedagogical model in INVEST will incorporate integral and multidisciplinary approaches, challenge-, competence-, and work-based methods, including transversal competences. Living labs have been established at each partner university, fostering collaboration for the creation, prototyping, validating, and testing of new technologies, services, products, and systems in real-life contexts.

INVEST strategic priorities are the following:

- Enhancing the high quality of education via challenge-based and transdisciplinary approaches, and through innovative pedagogical models to develop forward-looking skills and competences, making best use of digital technologies, blended learning, and work-based learning.
- Strengthening the links between education and research and/or innovation, including the integration of research results and/or innovation into education.
- Increasing mobility of students, staff, and researchers - physical, virtual, blended short and long term.
- Strengthening engagement with key stakeholders to foster societal engagement of students and staff as well as their entrepreneurial key competences.
- Building human capacity and promoting staff competence development to foster high-level European education and research.
- Improving the involvement of local community.
- Ensuring the social diversity of the student body and promoting the access, participation, and completion of under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

INVEST is an innovative structural model that enhances cooperation between partner universities, aiming to achieve policy objectives in the European Education Area. It includes multilingualism, automatic recognition of academic qualifications, unified recognition and validation of curricula and training materials, and the use of the European Student Card, among other benefits.

## **Internal and external environment challenges of INVEST**

The INVEST alliance links higher education to research and innovation, developing innovative structural models for transnational value. Other initiatives, similar to Erasmus+ or Horizon projects, require larger scale and strategic prospects. However, INVEST faces challenges such as legal and administrative issues due to varying national regulations and inconsistencies, necessitating EU and national level reforms.

### **A. *Internal environment (INVEST Alliance HEIs): Deep level of integration.***

INVEST in its initial state faces challenges such as legal and administrative issues due to varying national regulations and inconsistencies. To achieve the ambition of the EUI, INVEST must establish organizational patterns that further develop the alliance solution without replacing individual university entities. This includes developing a strategic approach towards international collaboration, aligning the alliance's long-term strategy with the partners', adopting innovation in teaching and learning, and fostering a common ground in learning and teaching approaches.

High cooperation in curriculum design is essential to address current societal and economic issues. Student-centered curricula should be jointly delivered across inter-university campuses, allowing diverse student bodies to build their own programs and experience mobility at all levels of study. Complementary facilities should be provided to the alliance, and resources should be provided for the operation of the EU Alliance.

Flexibility in recognition of prior knowledge and award recognition is also crucial. Human Resources management and workload accountability should be more flexible to facilitate cooperative work within the framework of the alliance. Additionally, obstacles and difficulties for mobility should be removed to enhance virtual mobility.

Lack of resources is a major reason for institutions not participating in the EUI. Only a minority received extra funding for the application or development of the initiative after successful selection at the European Union level. A challenge-based approach should be adopted, allowing students, academics, and external partners to cooperate in inter-disciplinary teams to tackle the biggest issues facing Europe today.

### **B. *External environment: Policy reforms***

Deep level of integration cannot be achieved without policy reforms and enhancements at both national and EU level:



### ***B.1 National level***

- Legal model of EU University must be defined. Alternative models can be considered that may allow partner universities to maintain its national identity. Social / Political perspective should be considered.
- Need for more autonomy in certain partner countries. EUA document “University Autonomy in Europe III: The Scorecard 2017” (Enora Bennetot Pruvot and Thomas Estermann, 2017) is quite informative on differences between countries and should be considered.
- The model of public funding to state universities must be re-examined to address issues related to students studying at INVEST programs.
- Alignment of national policies with the 2025 EU vision for the Higher Education Area and relative initiatives at European level.
- Removal of obstacles regarding accreditation of joint degrees, academic recognition of degrees issued by partner universities, and recognition of prior learning.
- A survey of more than 200 higher education institutions across Europe has found that the need to provide additional resources, considerable amounts of co-funding and ensure long-term sustainability are the biggest challenges for participating in the EUI.
- In (University World News, 2023) the EUA calls on governments and policy-makers responsible for higher education and research to “work together to address and eventually remove the remaining obstacles and work towards greater compatibility of systems across Europe. This must build on the work that has already been done and that continues in the framework of the Bologna Process and the European Research Area”.

### ***B.2 EU level***

- Absence of clear definition for the future framework. What is the role of existing partner university in the envisaged EU University? What is the finance scheme for the EU University? Hybrid models to be considered. Acceptance of the new model by academic society and other stakeholders.
- Higher grants and follow-up funding, the elimination of legal and administrative obstacles, the development of the research dimension and increasing synergies with other EU funding programs are the five top recommendations declared as very important by the majority of respondents.

### **Road map and policy recommendations**

The INVEST results are crucial for the alliance's sustainability and integration. Defined goals and a roadmap are necessary, along with policy

changes at institutional, national, and EU levels. INVEST's methodology involves analyzing alliance partners' views on long-term strategic goals and university autonomy. The following subsections contain for every major aspect of the INVEST operation and implementation the road map of INVEST and the policy recommendations. All tables contain partner information which can track integration progress, identify issues for university consideration, and provide policy recommendations at EU, at national and institutional levels in order to establish exploitation business plans. We define target dates using quarters of years (Q1,..Q4) as the processes discussed are macro-implemented. The connection between the roadmap and the policy recommendations is by mapping roadmap steps to certain policies (P1, ... , Pn). Finally, policies are categorized either as national (N) or as at EU level.

#### **A. *Joint Study programs***

The INVEST alliance aims to enhance education quality and provide innovative products at an international level, focusing on students' needs and labor market requirements. The alliance emphasizes quality assurance, learning outcomes, innovative pedagogical models, and strengthening links between education and research. INVEST has implemented innovative teaching strategies, staff development programs, and materials for group and individual trainings. The results include 10 bachelor specializations, 4 Master programs, and 2 doctoral programs in three main focus areas: Water, Energy, Food and Environment Nexus, Quality of Life, and Environment. Moreover, INVEST promotes strategic thinking, problem-solving skills, and critical reflection. The alliance has developed the EDUC8EU integrated platform, which facilitates personalized learning pathways for students based on their learning state, personality, interests, and requirements. The alliance plans to move away from the typical ERASMUS+ exchange scheme and offer flexible programs with a mixed delivery model, including distance and hybrid learning along with physical workshops.

The partnership has succeeded in making a sizable selection of study programs in the INVEST focus areas accessible to students from all partner universities as well as students from universities outside the INVEST consortium, even from universities outside the EHEA. Particular acts consist of those shown in Table I and II:

**TABLE I.** Road map for joint study programs

<b>Exploitation of results in Education and Training</b>	<b>Target dates</b>	<b>Required Policy Changes</b>
Evolution of Bachelor specializations to accredited Micro credentials offered jointly by the INVEST consortium	Q2 2024	P1
Increase integration and involvement of Living Labs in learning approaches. Identify research opportunities. Develop INVEST internships at Living Labs to be offered at all INVEST partner University students (no need for further accreditation to be included in curricula)	Q2 2024	
Accreditation of already developed MSc and Ph.D. programs following the European Approach for QA of Joint Degrees and beginning of offering to students.	Q3 2024	P2
Enhance student's entrepreneurial skills through INVEST LLL courses, etc.	Q2 2025	
Wide promotion of INVEST programs among partner Universities	Q3 2023 – Q3 2025	P3
Consider the possibility of INVEST incubators for start ups	Q2 2025	
INVEST as an agent of Educational Innovation: Pilot introduction of EDUC8EU in determining flexible learning paths. Review and evaluation of the tool.	Q2 2024 – Q3 2025	
Dissemination of INVEST pedagogical model at partner universities	Q3 2023 – Q3 2025	

**TABLE II.** Policy changes for joint study programs

P1	Minimize / removal incompatibilities of national qualification frameworks and heterogenous structures of 1st and 2nd cycle programs due to legal, regulatory and administrative barriers among EU countries. National qualifications systems and frameworks open up to micro-credentials.	N
P2	National QA and Accreditation agencies subscribe to the European Approach for QA of Joint Programs for joint educational programs developed under a EU Alliance framework.	N
P3	Ensure a separate part of Erasmus student mobility funds for student mobility within the EU Alliance Universities	N/EU

## **B. Lifelong Learning**

The initiative aims to link ECTS and ECVET, focusing on learning outcomes through competency-based, learner-centered, and interdisciplinary approaches. It aims to achieve excellence in key areas like water, energy, food, environment, quality of life, and entrepreneurship. The model will enhance cooperation, promote multilingualism, automatic recognition of qualifications, and validate curricula. Tables III and IV show these actions in respect to roadmap and policy recommendations:

**TABLE III.** Road map for lifelong learning

<b>Exploitation of results Lifelong learning</b>	<b>Target dates</b>	<b>Required Policy Changes</b>
Develop a roster of LLL trainings within the INVEST framework to be used as important training facility of sustainable development for civic society in the regions. Important source for continuous education on a high level.	Q2 2024	
Develop system for recognition of ECVET to ECTS, micro-credentials derived from the Bachelor specializations on INVEST focal points in relation with Living Labs	Q4 2024	P4
Enhance student's entrepreneurial skills through INVEST LLL courses, etc.	Q2 2025	
Wide promotion of INVEST LLL programs among partner Universities	Q3 2023 – Q3 2025	
Consider the possibility of INVEST incubators for start ups	Q2 2025	

**TABLE IV.** Policy changes for lifelong learning

P4	Lift barriers to the uptake of microcredentials in national context (e.g., commonly agreed definition, lack of funding, regulatory barriers, incentives for education and training providers, accreditation schemes, recognition frameworks etc.). Promote common understanding and standards for micro-credentials. Guidelines and practices for recognition of ECVT to ECTS in EHEA	EU, N
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### **C. *Student Recruitment – Admission and Services***

The promotion of INVEST principles in pedagogy and efficient learning strategies among the academic communities of partner universities can be accomplished by recruiting and mobilizing students from partner universities to enroll in Bachelor specializations and Master programs that INVEST has developed. A key success factor for the INVEST project is unquestionably the positive acceptance of INVEST products by student communities, initially at partner universities. A strategic goal of INVEST and EU initiatives is to recruit students from beyond partner universities and even the EU. INVEST alliance has started to investigate potential markets outside of the EU, establish targeted market strategies, and promote the INVEST approach's core principles while partner universities take part in hiring initiatives. These are necessary actions:

- A list of the partner universities includes all programs. Students are chosen based on general guidelines and program-specific criteria. The process of choosing students is supported by EDUC8EU.
- Until INVEST becomes a legal entity, students can be admitted and registered at any of the partner institutions.

Partner universities may promote INVEST courses while adhering to its selection criteria, accepting chosen students, and taking part in the awarding of joint degrees. These universities may also do other things to support INVEST students while they are studying there, such as:

- Offer student services, such as social services.
- Ensure that there are funds available for student mobility in INVEST study programs.
- Offer staff mobilizations in line with the INVEST program's requirements.
- Internal trainings for cutting-edge pedagogy and training techniques.
- Exploitation of INVEST products can be strengthened through policies at institutional, national and EU level as listed below in Tables V and VI:

**TABLE V:** Road map for student recruitment, admission and services

<b>Student Recruitment, Admission, Administration</b>	<b>Target dates</b>	<b>Required Policy Changes</b>
Establish the full portfolio of INVEST programs and detailed information materials within each partner university – Organize INVEST promotion events at each partner University emphasizing the added value of INVEST study programs.	Q1 2024	
Ensure active participation of Living Labs in the delivery of INVEST programs and promote it as one of the strong points of INVEST pedagogy.	Q1 2024	
Organize INVEST open days for recruiting student at each partner University (hybrid mode) bringing interested students in contact with program directors, teaching staff, Living labs, as part of Erasmus student mobility actions.	Q2 2024	P5
Push necessary policy changes at University and National level, to lift possible barriers and facilitate student mobility within INVEST. Ensure INVEST student mobility fundings	Q2 2024	P6
Promotion of INVEST study portfolio beyond the Alliance geographical boundaries	Q2 2025	P7

**TABLE VI.** Policy changes for student recruitment, admission and services

P5	Ensure a separate part of Erasmus student mobility funds for student mobility within the EU Alliance Universities	HEIs, N
P6	Students enrolled in any INVEST program are eligible to the rights and obligations at studying institution's current policy (regardless of Erasmus exchange or not)	N
P7	Establishment of "EU label" for study programs offered by European University Alliances	EU

#### D. *Research*

INVEST aims to establish a sustainable link between students' education and national research and innovation. Living Labs in participating countries/regions provide innovative platforms for collaboration, combining conventional education with innovative learning methods. The alliance focuses on intensive interaction between education, research, and innovation, utilizing partner universities' experience in national and international research projects, joint publications, and scientific conferences. Specific actions include expanding Living Lab research areas and increasing international level activities shown in Tables VII and VIII:

**TABLE VII.** Road map for research

Development of joint research agenda	Target dates	Required Policy Changes
Develop joint multisectoral, transnational research agenda	Q1 2024	
Joint acquisition of research funding (preferably as INVEST Alliance)	Q3 2025	P8
Enhance EDUC8EU - enrich database. Moderation and maintenance of EDUC8EU	Q3 2024	
Extending the Living lab research areas; increasing the LL activities at international level	Q2 2024	
Establish INVEST Living Lab Network (LLN). Communication between Living labs.	Q1 2024	
Application of INVEST LLN into other areas of education and research	Q2 2024	
Consider the possibility of INVEST incubators for start ups	Q2 2024	

**TABLE VIII.** Policy changes for research

P8	Allow EU Alliances to participate in Research program calls (Horizon, etc.)	EU
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#### E. *Organizational Structures – Operations*

The INVEST European University Alliance aims to expand its operations and manage resources to ensure joint capacity and capability. Key elements include a digital INVEST campus, management and administration bodies, and processes to ensure high-quality outcomes. A transparent Quality Assurance (QA) policy is essential for the vision of INVEST, which focuses on sustainable cooperation for education, research, innovation, and knowledge transfer. Common guidelines and procedures for QA, continuous evaluation of curricula, and innovative tools for feedback collection are needed. INVEST needs to align its operation scheme with a legal, transparent operation scheme, and address differences in academic calendars. Proper financial policies and a common plan for administration and

management of tuition fees for INVEST programs are also necessary. A transparent plan for alliance member funding and in-kind contributions is also needed. Roadmap and policy recommendations, as shown in Tables IX and X respectively include:

**TABLE IX.** Road map for Organizational Structures - Operations

Development of joint Quality Assurance / Enhancement Processes	Target dates	Required Policy Changes
Make the INVEST digital campus the unique host of all educational, training, research (including Living Labs) and communication activities of students and staff	Q1 2024	
Improvement of the INVEST internal quality assurance to be fully compliant with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Implementing into the system the innovative INVEST pedagogy and methodologies related to the joint educational practices. Host at digital campus	Q2 2024	
Ensure compatibility with partner University QA processes	Q2 2024	P9
Develop Service level agreements among partners. Schemes for INVEST staffing, work schedules	Q2 2024	
Align academic calendars within the Alliance	Q3 2024	P10
Develop of a Common Funding Policy	Q3 2024	P11
INVEST 3-year Operational and Business Plan		

**TABLE X.** Policy changes for Organizational Structures - Operations

P9	Introduce flexibility in National Quality Assurance frameworks as long as INVEST Alliance QA processes are in compliance with ESG and other relevant initiatives at the EHEA.	HEIs, N
P10	Introduce flexibility and autonomy to HEIs to align academic calendars across the Alliance Universities.	HEIs, N
P11	Introduce flexibility in national regulations regarding the management of funds of State Universities regarding their participation in European University Alliances	HEIs, N

## F. Governance

The INVEST Alliance faces administrative and regulatory barriers that hinder integrated cooperation across borders. One of the main barriers is the legal statute, which does not fully allow for the deeper cooperation of the partners. The Commission proposes exploring the necessity and feasibility of a legal statute for European Universities and other university alliances to facilitate cooperation between education institutions from different Member States. The DG EAC launched 10 pilot projects funded by Erasmus+ to test new forms of transnational cooperation between higher education

institutions. Six of the selected projects will examine and facilitate the delivery of a joint European Degree label, while the other four projects will allow alliances to test new forms of cooperation, such as a possible European legal status. Along these lines, INVEST proposes the following roadmap and policy recommendations shown in Tables XI and XII respectively:

**TABLE XI.** Road map for Governance

<b>Development of Governance: Legal Entity</b>	<b>Target dates</b>	<b>Required Policy Changes</b>
Investigate possible solutions proposed by the 6 ERASMUS+ projects regarding the implementation of European degree label vis-a-vis national and institutional barriers at partner universities. Propose policy changes at national level	Q1 2024	P12
Investigate possible solutions proposed by the 4 ERASMUS+ projects regarding new forms of cooperation, such as a possible European legal status for these alliances	Q2 2024	P13
Decide on the type of proper legal entity form for the INVEST Alliance. Define options, feasibility of implementation and contingencies for INVEST Alliance	Q3 2024	
Consultations among partner Universities and National Authorities to arrive at a legal entity form that allows INVEST to act and have university rights.	Q4 2024	P14

**TABLE XII.** Policy changes for Governance

P12	Implement European degree label at National Higher Education Systems	HEIs, N
P13	Introduce EU policies and models of feasible legal entity forms for European University Alliances	EU
P14	Introduce flexible modes of operations at HEIs that allow them to operate in a hybrid organizational schemes as autonomous national HEI entities and as part of a European HEI entity.	HEIs, N

## Conclusion

The goal of the current paper is to present the impact of the INVEST project in support of pertinent EU initiatives. It does this by outlining the necessary steps and making a set of roadmap actions for the future of the alliance as well as many policy recommendations that must be made either at national or at European level for the sustainability of such alliances and their transition to become legal entities. The goal is to establish a uniform quality assurance model, an EU-wide accreditation policy for all universities, by mandating collaboration between EU Member States on educational fields, fostering innovation in the educational setting, promoting high standards for educational leadership in scientific disciplines, and helping to raise the bar for services provided by higher education.

However, for these objectives to be realistic and effective, specific policy changes at the institutional, national, and European levels are needed



to remove barriers to the realization of INVEST aspirations as well as those of other European University Alliances. Finding a suitable governance structure, securing long-term funding, being clear about granting credits and degrees, and removing administrative and legal impediments are the main concerns.

All stakeholders, including institutions, national regulators, and EU policy makers, must work toward greater convergence while maintaining structures and approaches that are sufficiently open and flexible due to the existence of various regulatory power distributions, levels and systems of funding, academic cultures, and traditions. The INVEST alliance thinks that the proposals and activities in this report will help achieve that objective.

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