FOREU4ALL
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES

D3.2

Policy Learning Lab Recommendations

Edition I

FOREU4ALL
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES

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1. Introduction & Strategic Reflections: The Policy Learning Lab Format

1.1 Background and Purpose of Policy Dialogue within FOREU4ALL

FOREU4ALL Work Package 3 (WP3, Policy Dialogue) serves as the dedicated bridge connecting the practical, ground-level experiences of European Universities Alliances with European, national, and regional policy development frameworks. While Alliances operate as testbeds for deep institutional integration, systemic change requires continuous, structured exchange and alignment between the Alliances and key policymakers and Higher Education (HE) sector stakeholders to openly discuss policy developments, share experiences and help support evidence-based policymaking.

To facilitate this alignment, WP3 established the **Policy Learning Lab (PLL)** series. The primary objective of the PLL format is to transform fragmented institutional insights into collective policy intelligence, bridging top-down policy formulation with bottom-up implementation realities. The PLLs serve as a key space for open discussion, exchange of good practices but also challenges, and a space for brainstorming and co-creation of possible solutions between Alliances, policymakers and HE stakeholders.

Individual discussion topics are chosen following a 2-way strategy. Most PLLs directly build upon the work of experts active in the 20 FOREU4ALL Topical Groups, bringing forward their topical expertise, data collection results and lived experiences, all the while ensuring a broad appeal and participation across the Alliances and the wider education sector.

However, there are also other topics of a more structural and overarching character that go beyond the focus of individual Topical Groups, as they touch upon the functioning and future of the European Universities Initiative as such. These topics are either selected based on identification of the most pressing policy discussions at the time, be it due to new policy developments or publication of key resources by the higher

education stakeholders, or through direct engagement with PLL participants through post-event surveys and subsequent discussions at the FOREU4ALL General Forum (bringing together all Alliance coordinators), Forum Board (15 elected Alliance representatives, including a Chair, two Vice-Chairs, the Project Management Team, and the Central Office) or WP3 monthly meetings (bringing together Alliances' policy experts).

1.2 Reflections on the Format and Impact

Over the course of the first three Policy Learning Labs, the format has proven to be an effective mechanism for open exchange and dialogue and high-level policy engagement across the Alliance and wider HE community:

- **Safe Space for Open Dialogue:** The virtual-first and multi-level panel approach, combining high-level policy exchanges with policymakers (e.g. DG EAC, DG RTD, DG INTPA) and HE stakeholders (e.g. The Guild, EUA, ACA, Coimbra), complemented with concrete case studies, findings and data presented by relevant Topical Groups (e.g. Topical Group for Internationalisation and Global Outreach and Topical Group for Cooperation with Ukraine), external perspectives (e.g. Member State perspective, Canadian perspective), thematic break-out sessions and open Q&As, successfully created a space for candid discussion, raising of difficult questions, exchange of challenges and best practices and an opportunity to collectively brainstorm possible solutions.
- **Broad Inclusivity and Reach:** Across the first three Labs, the PLL format brought together over 440 active participants. This included broad representation across the 65 European Universities Alliances, sector-wide representative bodies (EUA, The Guild, ESN, ESU, Coimbra), European policymakers, national and regional authorities, international partners and representatives of national agencies, and researchers interested in learning more about the European Universities Initiative and its broader impact.

- **Capacity Building Across Alliances:** Beyond communicating outward to policymakers, the Labs also serve a vital internal function. By bringing together all generations of European Universities Alliances, the format enables newer and established Alliances to learn from each other, share peer-to-peer strategies, challenges and best practices, and brainstorm concrete strategies for targeted policy engagement on national and EU level. This broadens cross-Alliance cooperation, raises awareness of existing support networks and strategic toolkits, and strengthens evidence-based policymaking directly supported by on-the-ground experiences and concrete case studies.

1.3 Critical Evaluation and Operational Challenges

While highly successful in generating broad engagement, open discussion and strengthening policy awareness across the Alliances, the execution of the first three PLLs highlighted key operational challenges that will be further addressed in the remaining duration of the project:

- **Time Constraints vs. Analytical Depth:** Operating as 1.5-to-2-hour virtual sessions enabled high participation rates across Europe and attendance of senior policymakers and management staff who would otherwise not be able to join due to scheduling conflicts or travel limitations. However, this condensed duration naturally constrains more in-depth discussions and provides only a limited space for open Q&As at the end of each session. In order to reverse this trend, the PLL organising team is planning to complement the webinar-style PLLs with one or two on-site workshops in 2027 and 2028, which would not only allow space for a deeper exchange of ideas and experiences but also provide the opportunity to collectively develop actionable capacity-building toolkits and materials, be it guidelines, templates or concrete policy recommendations. Moreover, for specifically complex topics, including the international dimension of European Universities Alliances, individual PLLs are turned into a series of encounters with dedicated deep dives, ensuring that the chosen topic is

discussed from various angles. Follow-up discussions, webinars and online workshops, either in the framework of WP3 or the General Forum/Forum Board are also organized if necessary. At the moment, an Investment Pathway Workshop is currently under preparation by a Forum Board Task Force, directly building on the discussions held during PLL 2 on sustainable funding for the Alliances (see more information about this PLL and its take-aways below).

- **Actionability of Outcomes:** Translating short-term webinar discussions into long-term policy influence requires sustained follow-up. However, given that the Policy Dialogue is led only by a limited number of Alliances and official policy positions would require approval from a majority of Alliance Coordinators in the FOREU4ALL General Forum, the possibility to provide concrete policy recommendations has been limited. Despite this limitation, the aim of the Policy Dialogue is primarily to act as a forum for discussion and bridge-building across diverse stakeholders, which is something that the PLL organising team plans to lean into even more strongly in the upcoming months. Member state authorities, research and education attaches, and the broader higher education community (including researchers and higher education institutions not participating in Alliances) are of particular strategic interest here. Bearing these limitations in mind, outcomes of each PLL are still discussed by the WP3 team, Forum Board and General Forum whenever necessary, ensuring inclusivity of voices and identification of next steps across the Community of Practice.
- **Community of Practice vs. Lobbying and Advocacy in the Policy Realm:** The PLL format must carefully maintain its identity as an inclusive Community of Practice (CoP), primarily focused on the inner needs and interests of the participating Alliances. Its strength lies in presenting evidence-based insights and collective experience rather than acting as a singular advocacy or lobbying entity, a role that is already maintained by well-established HE stakeholder organisations. However, as was demonstrated in the first batch of organised PLLs, there is great benefit in actively engaging HE stakeholder representatives, be it as speakers or

moderators of break-out sessions. Their cutting-edge research, policy insights and knowledge of the broader field helps to significantly broaden the PLLs' focus and thematic expertise and expands its group of participants. This way, FOREU4ALL's activities, and the Policy Learning Labs in particular, help strengthen the advocacy and lobbying potential of already established higher education stakeholders. Their engagement with the Community of Practice is therefore a positive development with potential added benefits to the wider higher education sector.

2. Synthesis of Key Policy Topics & Main Ongoing Challenges Identified Across PLLs

Across the three Policy Learning Labs, several recurring, overarching themes emerged:

2.1 Sustainable Funding & Systemic Integration: Shifting from short-term project grants to permanent, multi-level co-funding

A central theme across all discussions is the necessity of transitioning Alliances from a "pilot project logic" toward long-term financial and operational sustainability. Current competitive grant cycles under Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe create resource instability and overlapping application and reporting requirements. Achieving long-term impact requires systemic integration by linking EU baseline funding with stable national matching funds and internal university budget reallocations.

2.2 Policy Engagement & Multi-Level Coordination: Overcoming fragmented national legislation and uneven national coordination structures

The legal and regulatory environments governing higher education still mostly lay in the hands of national or regional authorities. Alliances frequently encounter legal barriers affecting joint degrees, micro-credentials, cross-border data sharing and mobility, and staff employment structures. Effective policy engagement requires harmonized, multi-level coordination mechanisms between the European Commission, national ministries,

and Alliances to address regulatory friction systematically and allow for a more balanced approach.

2.3 Geopolitical Outreach & Science Diplomacy: Enabling a deeper and more seamless global cooperation and partnership outreach

European Universities Alliances are increasingly recognized as strategic assets for European science diplomacy and global engagement objectives. However, Alliances often face rigid administrative constraints when attempting to include non-EU partners. Bridging the gap between high-level geopolitical strategies (such as Global Gateway) and practical administrative rules with sufficient funding remains an urgent priority.

3. Summary & Key Outcomes and Takeway as of Policy Learning Labs 1-3

The section below only provides a brief summary. For detailed information about each Policy Learning Lab, including the rationale for its selection and a more elaborate explanation of its policy relevance, please consult the Policy Learning Lab Full Event Reports available in the Appendix.

3.1 PLL #1: Policy Dialogue and Engagement in European Universities Alliances

- **Date:** 6 June 2025
- **Participants:** ~110 attendees
- **Core Focus:** Practice exchange, synergy identification, and capacity building for Alliance-level policy engagement. Raising awareness of the importance of policy development on the future of the European Universities Initiative and sharing experiences and best practices in policy dialogue between more and less policy advanced Alliances. Direct involvement of HE stakeholders in providing input and facilitating hands-on break-out sessions. Arose from a need to overcome a gap in policy awareness and engagement among different generations of Alliances.

Key Outcomes & Takeaways

- **Diversity as Strength:** Diversity among the 65 Alliances (in size, scope, governance, and geography) is an asset, provided it is supported by flexible policy frameworks rather than a one-size-fits-all model.
- **National Coordination Gap:** While EU-level dialogue is well-structured, national engagement varies drastically across Member States. There is a clear need for formal national coordination platforms to facilitate dialogue between ministries and local Alliance members.
- **Synergy with HE Sector Stakeholders:** Alliances should work in synergy with established HEI stakeholder organizations (EUA, EURASHE, ESU, The Guild, Coimbra) to complement, rather than duplicate, sector-wide advocacy efforts.

3.2 PLL #2: Strategic Dialogue on Sustainable Funding for European Universities Alliances

- **Date:** 20 April 2026
- **Participants:** ~165 attendees
- **Core Focus:** Post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), long-term financial models and sustainability of the Initiative. Directly informed by four recently published and cutting-edge publications on sustainable funding models for European Universities Alliances written by key HE stakeholders. Topic chosen for its timely nature in the middle of new MFF negotiations and direct implications for the future of the whole European Universities Initiative.

Key Outcomes & Takeaways

- **The "Triple-Helix" Co-Funding Model:** Long-term sustainability requires a formal co-funding architecture combining EU core funding, dedicated national/regional matching grants, and internal institutional budget integration.
- **Post-2027 MFF Architecture:** Strong consensus emerged for establishing dedicated, simplified funding streams in the next MFF, moving beyond short-

term competitive calls to provide predictable institutional baseline support, ensuring the Initiative's long-term stability and scale-up.

- **Elimination of Administrative Red Tape:** Complex, overlapping application and reporting rules between several EU and national funding mechanisms place severe administrative burdens on universities, highlighting the need for simplified cost options and harmonized reporting. As further explained in the FOREU4ALL Discussion Paper, "European Universities Alliances: Beating Heart of Europe's Future", Alliances are calling for a funding system that is long-term, holistic, non-directional and flexible.

3.3 PLL #3 Internationalisation Series Launch Webinar: Alliances Without Borders – Connecting European Values with Regional and Global Engagement

- **Date:** 17 June 2026
- **Participants:** ~170 attendees
- **Core Focus:** Global outreach, science diplomacy, enlargement strategies and EU neighbourhood cooperation (Ukraine, Western Balkans), and alignment with Global Europe objectives. Topic chosen due to its timely nature (e.g. UK re-joining Erasmus+, Switzerland in Erasmus+. Global Europe funding opportunities, increased cooperation with Ukraine and Western Balkans, publication of the Mediterranean University Initiative) and as a natural extension of the work of the Topical Groups on Internationalisation and Global Outreach and Cooperation with Ukraine. This Launch Webinar served as an opening of a full series on the International Dimension of European Universities Alliances and will be followed by a number of deep dives focused on the most important case studies (UK, Switzerland, Ukraine, Western Balkans, cooperation with other continents). This particular series has already showed its key role in bringing together European policymakers across different European Commission services (DG EAC, DG RTD, DG INTPA) to discuss the possibility of a multi-lateral Global Europe strategy, attracting the attention of global partners not (yet) involved with Alliances (e.g.

Canadian universities, SCOPE-HE ASEAN project), and amplifying the voice of non-EU university partners already active in the Initiative.

Key Outcomes & Takeaways

- **Closing the Strategy-Implementation Gap:** Strategic geopolitical ambitions set by the EU must be backed by accessible funding instruments; current rules under Erasmus+ restrict deep global partnerships.
- **Integrating Global Europe Funds:** The integration of Global Europe funds into Alliances' funding calls would broaden participation and enable deeper and more structured international cooperation.
- **Full Partnership for Accession States:** Higher education institutions from EU neighbourhood and candidate countries (e.g., Ukraine, Western Balkans) should receive a full partnership status within Alliances rather than conditional or associated roles to support systemic alignment with EHEA standards and a deeper engagement within the Alliance activities.

4. Targeted Policy Recommendations

Based on the strategic syntheses of insights and main discussion takeaways collected during Policy Learning Labs 1-3, the following actionable recommendations to key higher education stakeholders and policymakers have been raised:

4.1 For European-Level Policymakers

1. **Establishment of a Sustainable Funding Framework:** Introduction of a dedicated, simplified funding line in the next MFF that combines educational, research and innovation dimensions and service to society (i.e. all parts of the knowledge square) into a single administrative framework. The new funding model should be long-term, holistic, non-directional and flexible, as already

outlined in the FOREU4ALL Discussion Paper endorsed by the whole Community of Alliances at the General Forum.

2. **Harmonization of Global Outreach Funding:** Injection of Global Europe funding into Erasmus+ Alliance funding streams to support the creation of global partnerships, international mobility, global virtual campuses, and capacity-building projects without separate administrative burdens.
3. **Advancement of the 5th Freedom and 28th Regime:** Accelerating legal instruments (such as the European Degree Label, EGTC) to dismantle cross-border administrative barriers and enhance the free flow of knowledge.

4.2 For Member States & National/Regional Authorities

1. **Institutionalization of National Dialogue Platforms:** Establishment of formal national coordination mechanisms (mirroring models such as Spain's national alliance taskforce) involving ministries, national agencies, and Alliance representatives to foster dialogue and a mutually beneficial co-creative process.
2. **Commitment to Long-Term Co-Funding:** Development and strengthening of national co-funding mechanisms that automatically match EU Alliance grants, ensuring financial stability and reduction of administrative overlaps and barriers.
3. **Adaptation of National HE Legislation:** Modernization of national accreditation regulations and degree-granting laws to accommodate joint educational offerings, micro-credentials, staff and student mobility, and shared governance structures.

4.3 For European Universities Alliances

1. **Embedding Alliances into Core University Structures:** Transitioning internal Alliance management from temporary project offices into core university administration ("changing the box") to ensure institutional embedding and university management commitment to the Initiative.
2. **Enhancing Policy Awareness and Exchange:** Leveraging FOREU4ALL and WP3 meetings and events to foster open dialogue, awareness about latest policy

developments, active engagement and exchange of challenges and best practices, while bringing Alliances, policymakers, national and regional authorities, and HE stakeholders together to the same discussion table.

3. **Expanding Purposeful Global Partnerships:** Aligning international cooperation strategies with the principles of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, research safety and European values, which lie at the very core of Alliances' work and existence.

5. Conclusion & Next Steps

The first three Policy Learning Labs under the framework of FOREU4ALL WP3 Policy Dialogue have successfully demonstrated the value of structured, collaborative and open policy dialogue. By connecting European policymakers, Member State representatives, HE stakeholders, and Alliance coordinators, the PLL format has moved beyond simple information sharing toward identifying systemic solutions for transforming the European higher education as a whole.

Moving forward, the WP3 team will build upon this foundation, and address the identified challenges and PLL format shortcomings, by:

- **From webinars to workshops**. Expanding the online webinar format to one or two on-site workshops in 2027 and 2028 to move from dialogue and awareness-raising to a hands-on capacity building training and production of tangible documents, be it guidelines, toolkits, actionable steps for Alliances' internal transformation, and concrete policy recommendations.
- **Focus on bridge-building**. Broadening the PLL target audience through an active outreach to the wider HE community and HE institutions that are not members of the Alliances. This will be done in cooperation with the EUI "sister projects" SPREAD EUI and Future4Alliances. In a similar vein, a concerted effort will be made in reaching out to and actively engaging Member State representatives, be it via an open dialogue with research and education attaches, active participation

at open IGLO meetings or collaboration with identified national groups of HEIs in Alliances.

- **Maintaining Community of Practice identity while leveraging external expertise**. Ensuring that PLLs remain an inclusive Community of Practice activity focused on evidence-based exchange and open dialogue rather than advocacy or lobbying, while actively involving HE stakeholders and other external experts as speakers and session leads to deepen thematic expertise and broaden participation.

6. Annexes / Complete Event Reports

- **Annex 1:** Full Event Report – Policy Learning Lab #1: Policy Dialogue and Engagement in European Universities Alliances (6 June 2025)
- **Annex 2:** Full Event Report – Policy Learning Lab #2: Securing the Future: Strategic Dialogue on Sustainable Funding for European Universities Alliances (20 April 2026)
- **Annex 3:** Full Event Report – Policy Learning Lab #3, Internationalisation Series Launch Webinar: Alliances Without Borders – Connecting European Values with Regional and Global Engagement (17 June 2026)

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