

THE VALUE OF BUILDING STRONG EUROPEAN RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

Lessons from ECIU
SMART-ER

Kaunas, 2024



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European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) is a network of universities united by a common profile of shared beliefs, interests, and mutual trust with the goal to ensure a culture of innovation in all member institutions and to provide a catalytic role for innovation in business and society at large.

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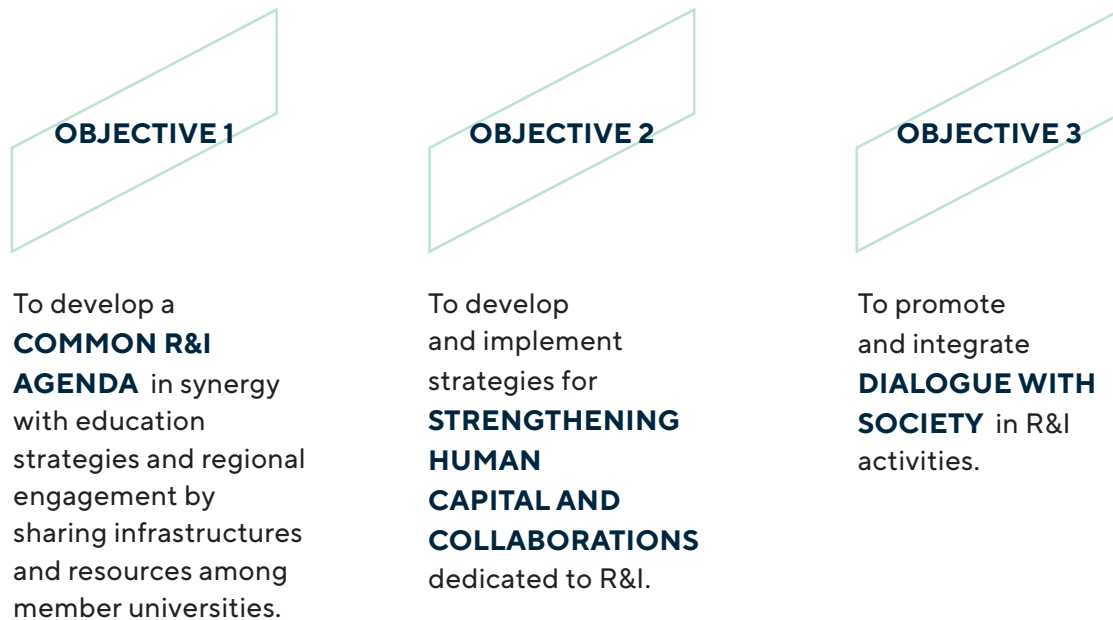
Solving current global challenges such as climate change or social inequalities demands the involvement of all actors in our societies. An education, research and innovation system which values and integrates the knowledge and views from science and society is thus essential.

ECIU University is the **first European university where learners, teachers and researchers cooperate with societal stakeholders to solve real-life challenges**. To leverage ECIU's transformational capacity in the Research and Innovation (R&I) system, the HORIZON 2020 SwafS programme European Universities granted funding for the creation of a research alliance within ECIU. As a result, the **ECIU University Research Institute for Smart European Regions (SMART-ER)** became a reality from 2021 until 2024.



What is the value
of SMART-ER?

SMART-ER is a **strong alliance in R&I and education** which enables all ECIU member universities to jointly address complex societal challenges under the framework of the UN SDG 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable). Its main objectives are:



To meet these goals, SMART-ER has been testing new instruments and structures **aimed at building strong research communities** among 12 different European universities. The main feature of these research communities is their **multi- and transdisciplinary composition**, as they involve researchers and societal stakeholders, including businesses, civil society, and local administrations.

In this paper, **we argue for the need to build strong research communities that address real-life challenges**. To do so, we elaborate on **three main lessons learned from SMART-ER** which result from the most relevant and conclusive data gathered during the last 1.5 years of the project.



Lessons

Lesson 1. Co-creating bottom-up research agendas is conducive to research inclusiveness and engagement *9*

Lesson 2. Implementing new governance structures can facilitate the interactions between researchers and societal stakeholders *10*


Lesson 3. Flexible seed funding is a successful financial instrument to build research communities if tailored to specific goals and expectations *11*

Lesson 1


PCO-CREATING BOTTOM-UP RESEARCH AGENDAS IS CONDUCTIVE TO RESEARCH INCLUSIVENESS AND ENGAGEMENT

SMART-ER partners are committed to the co-creation of an R&I agenda aiming at gathering knowledge from universities and societal stakeholders in the context of SDG 11. This process was instrumental in identifying the key topics for smart regions that drive the ECIU SMART-ER's challenge-based research approach. These topics fit into the five themes defined in the **ECIU's Long-term Joint Research Strategy**: (1) Energy and Sustainability, (2) Circular Economy, (3) Transport and Mobility, and (4) Resilient Communities, along with a cross-cutting area around (5) Citizen Science.


The co-creation of the R&I agenda included a series of methodological approaches:



A survey was designed to get an initial overview of the areas of expertise of the researchers, to identify the main barriers to research on the SDG 11 topics, to foster citizen science projects and collaboration with different stakeholders, and to engage researchers in the SMART-ER project. **128 researchers** from the participating universities completed the survey.



The survey participants were then invited to an **interview** to collect further information about their research areas, relationship with stakeholders, and willingness to engage in SMART-ER activities. As a result, the main topics and high-level concepts within the five research themes were identified.



Finally, an open and inclusive approach with the Innoduel platform was used to **crowdsource ideas and opinions** with the objective to build the basis of the R&I agenda. As a result, 1,715 ideas were collected, ranked, and prioritized within the five research themes.

Instead of setting a predefined R&I agenda, SMART-ER benefits from this open, bottom-up process to build five strong research communities addressing each of the themes.

Discussions with and among researchers generated engaging dynamics to identify common areas of interest. This process led to the formulation of concrete research topics within the research themes. By doing so, researchers of the member universities found their place in the SMART-ER research communities, and actively participated in the project. Inclusiveness and engagement thus were the main features of the co-created R&I agenda.

Lesson 2

IMPLEMENTING NEW GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES CAN FACILITATE THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND SOCIETAL STAKEHOLDERS

To support the R&I agenda and facilitate international challenge-based research, SMART-ER has built on an innovative governance model led by interdisciplinary communities of researchers and stakeholders across the ECIU network. The five research communities defined in SMART-ER through co-creation were led by a **Research Field Coordinator**. This new governance position was created to support the creation and development of research communities of practice and to accelerate synergies and joint opportunities to further build the ECIU ecosystem. The position of the Research Field Coordinator also aims to transform the conventional top-down decision-making processes into a governance model based on collaborative knowledge between researchers and stakeholders.

THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCH FIELD COORDINATOR...

HOLDS A SET OF RESPONSIBILITIES

- Lead and coordinate the different communities of practice;
- Incentivise and guide early career researchers to establish a sustainable European network for SDG 11;
- Establish challenge-based research as a central practice in the community;
- Facilitate research co-creation through ECIU hubs.

MUST COMPLY WITH SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

- Advanced R2, R3 or R4 researcher;
- Demonstrated public engagement and co-creation experience with multiple stakeholders;
- Co-created research elements aligning with ECIU's overall strategy;
- Participation in dissemination tasks.

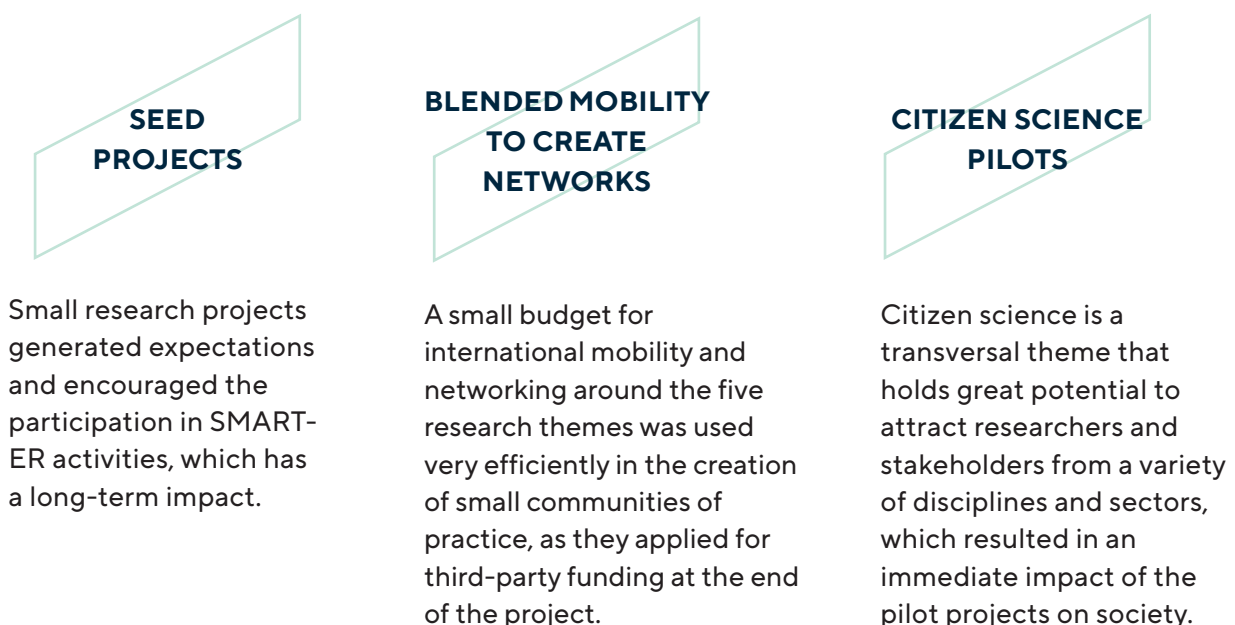
Research Field Coordinators were appointed by different universities on a voluntary basis, and internal agreements were made at each institution to compensate for their efforts. Designated Research Field Coordinators followed different approaches to lead their respective research communities and to connect different research and stakeholder profiles. Examples include the support of research mobility for PhD students or the use of the already existing local platforms to transfer knowledge and tools to the members of the research community. The SMART-ER experience confirms that this new position is of paramount importance in the co-creation, leadership and facilitation of research communities. The sense of community generated in each field was demonstrated by the widespread participation of SMART-ER researchers and stakeholders (>300 participants) in the **ECIU Research Conference** held in Barcelona in October 2023. **Working towards new governance models which stabilize this kind of coordinating position is thus recommended.**

Lesson 3

FLEXIBLE SEED FUNDING IS A SUCCESSFUL FINANCIAL INSTRUMENT TO BUILD RESEARCH COMMUNITIES IF TAILORED TO SPECIFIC GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Designing adequate funding instruments was also essential in activating the common R&I agenda. SMART-ER experimented with new funding options aiming to strengthen cross-disciplinary and intersectoral research collaborations and to incentivise further (international) high-quality research outputs. **Three funding modalities were tested:** 1) seed projects, 2) blended mobility to create networks, and 3) citizen science pilots. The financial burden of these instruments was small (25,000, 30,000€ and 120,000€ per project, respectively), but each served the purpose of generating impact and expectations to a varying extent.

OBSERVED IMPACT OF FLEXIBLE SEED FUNDING



SMART-ER launched competitive project calls for each modality, which resulted in the development of 5 seed projects, 4 networks, and 3 citizen science pilots. The citizen science pilots (**ECIE**, **Citizen Arenas** and **BiciZen**) were particularly successful in establishing new collaborations with stakeholders thanks to the open and inclusive co-creation processes that were encouraged in the call for proposals. Whereas these pilots had an immediate societal impact, seed projects generated more expectations among the research community. This modality offered a low budget to initiate small-scale research projects and incentivised their engagement in the SMART-ER research communities. The blended mobility networks had the largest impact on external funding. They proved to be an efficient way of making connections with researchers with similar interests to further explore research opportunities and easily build up consortia for more expensive research projects.

In essence, all three modalities were successful in the creation of strong research communities. For this reason, **adapting the available funding to the expected impact of research communities is essential.**



Disclaimer

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