

E³UDRES²

Engaged and Entrepreneurial European University as
Driver for European Smart and Sustainable Regions

E³UDRES² Applied Research Centres of Excellence (CoE) concept approved

Work Package 4

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AUTHORS: Polytechnic University of Setubal, St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, Jamk University of Applied Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, UC Leuven–Limburg University of Applied Sciences, Politehnica University Timisoara, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, MATE Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences*

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Overview

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Executive summary

This document describes the concept for the E³UDRES² Applied Research Centres of Excellence (CoE), including the criteria and methodology for their establishment, as well as the expected tasks and overall impact. It also outlines the piloting phases used to identify prospective CoE for support in developing future plans and activities, which contributed to shaping and refining the concept.

The E³UDRES² CoE are designed to foster high-quality, collaborative research within one of four thematic areas: Creative Industries, Digital Solutions, Health, Wellbeing & Social Inclusion, and Resilient Economy. Each CoE must involve researchers from at least three partner institutions, including a core team of five senior researchers with experience in European research projects.

Four proposals were selected during the first piloting phase in 2024. A second call is planned for autumn 2025, with selection and evaluation to take place in 2026. The evaluation process will assess aspects such as team quality, strategic alignment, governance structure, and financial sustainability. Centres meeting the criteria will be formally recognised as E³UDRES² Centres of Excellence.

This report lays the groundwork for the continued development of the concept, which will be further detailed in Deliverable 4.2, due in March 2026.

List of concepts

E³UDRES² Bank of Researchers (BoR) – a database of researchers' profiles and expertise.

Executive Board – Presidents and Rector of E³UDRES² partner universities.

E³UDRES² Focus Areas – the areas in which E³UDRES² focus, currently:

- Creative Industries for Regions' Identity
- Digital Solutions and (Applied) Deep Tech for Regions
- Health, Wellbeing and Social Inclusion for Regions
- Resilient Economy & Innovation for Regions

E³UDRES² research supporting team – currently, Work Package 4 – “Research and Knowledge Serving Users” team.

E³UDRES² researcher – a researcher from any of the partner universities that is registered in the Bank of Researchers.

E³UDRES² Scientific Council – the relevant body for academic and strategic aspects of research activities in E³UDRES². It was established in May 2024 and it is composed of senior researchers/scientists from all partners.

1. Introduction

E³UDRES², the Engaged and Entrepreneurial European University as Driver for European Smart and Sustainable Regions¹, a European University alliance established in October 2020, promotes the development of small and medium-sized cities and their rural environments into smart and sustainable European regions and shapes a prosperous future with the best possible quality of life for self-determined people in a progressive European society.

Regarding the specific challenges, opportunities and assets of the regions, E³UDRES² builds research collaborations related to the Focus Areas, which are currently four, as follows:

- Creative Industries for Regions' Identity
- Digital Solutions and (Applied) Deep Tech for Regions
- Health, Wellbeing and Social Inclusion for Regions
- Resilient Economy & Innovation for Regions

The E³UDRES² Research Strategy, approved by the Scientific Council and the Executive Board in December 2024, defines, as one of the strategic pillars, the establishment of E³UDRES² Applied Research Centres of Excellence (CoE).

The main aim of this report is to describe the concept for the CoE, including the criteria and methodology for their establishment. It also outlines the piloting phases used to identify prospective CoE for support in developing future plans and activities.

The concept of the future CoE was developed following the European research and policy trends, the E³UDRES² Research Strategy and the experience collected from a first piloting phase of four prospective CoE selected in 2024.

2. E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence – concept

2.1. Definition

The E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence (CoE) **connect researchers** from the E³UDRES² European University alliance who jointly develop **outstanding fundamental and applied research**, which supports and is interlinked with innovation, services and higher education, in a specific field, **within one of E³UDRES² Focus Areas**, to serve as a **catalyst for regional development** in that field.

The CoE ensure that excellence efforts in research are best combined and competitiveness and critical mass in research on a European level are achieved.

The CoE are committed to promote attractive and sustainable research careers of young researchers.

The CoE are managed according to high levels of efficiency and positive leadership and show financial viability.

2.2. Compulsory criteria for establishment of an E³UDRES² CoE

These are the basic compulsory criteria any E³UDRES² Applied Research Center of Excellence should meet:

a) Team:

- i) Participation of researchers from at least three E³UDRES² partner universities;

¹ <http://eudres.eu/>

- ii) Participation of at least five acknowledged senior researchers² with track-record that shows expertise in coordination of European research projects or at least some of its work packages.

b) **Research plan:**

- i) The research plan should align with, at least, one of the E³UDRES² focus areas.

2.3. Scope of support of CoE under project E³UDRES² 2.0

Under the ongoing Erasmus+ project for the further development of the E³UDRES² alliance (E³UDRES² 2.0), some pilots of the E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers are selected for further support on development. This support will consist mainly of capacity building, networking opportunities, guidance from high-ranking representatives of the various E³UDRES² boards and visibility, using E³UDRES² website and the alliance's communication channels. Moreover, they can benefit from the strategy for development of CoE that will be designed by the E³UDRES² Research Supporting Team that is due in March 2026.

The E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers assume their commitment to seek external sources of support and to plan their financial sustainability in the long run.

3. Piloting phases

3.1. First piloting phase

An Open Call for proposals (Appendix A) was launched by E³UDRES² in December 2023, an initiative from the Executive Board with the purpose of piloting some key profiling activities.

The selection criteria used for that open call have been:

- i) to be within one of the E³UDRES² focus areas;
- ii) engagement of at least 5 acknowledged senior researchers;
- iii) involvement of at least 3 E³UDRES² partners;
- iv) experience with European research projects;
- v) at least one of the partners with the right to offer doctoral programmes.

The pre-selection was performed by the WP4 lead and co-leads, later validated by the Executive Board. It should be noted that, at the moment of the evaluation, the E³UDRES² Scientific Council was not yet established³, the reason why they have not been involved in this process.

From a total of 20 proposals submitted, most showing a great potential, four pilots have been selected, in March 2024, for further support:

Table 1 – List of selected pilot CoE in 2024, sorted by application timestamp

Designation	Lead researcher	Lead partner	Other partners	Focus area(s)
Emerging Technologies of Experience Design in Arts & Culture	Sybille Moser	STPUAS	UPT, ViA	Creative Industries for Regions' Identity

² R3 and/or R4 according to the research career stage established by the European Commission; the descriptors can be found at <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/career-development/researchers#research-profiles-descriptors>

³ The E³UDRES² Scientific Council was only established in May 2024

Business Modelling for Managing Sustainability in a Circular and Climate Neutral Economy: Creating opportunities for Smart and Sustainable Regions	Timber Haaker	SAXION	All E ³ UDRES ² partners	Resilient Economy and Innovation for Regions
I ² RS: Intelligent Integral Robotic Systems	Abeje Y. Mersha	SAXION	IPS, UPT, UCLL	Resilient Economy and Innovation for Regions
European Center for Digital Health and Social Innovation (ECDHSI)	Vanessa Leung	STPUAS	JAMK, IPS, UCLL, ViA	Health, wellbeing and social inclusion for regions + Digital Solutions and (Applied) Deep Tech for Regions

The selected pilots will be further referred to as “*prospective E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence*” (pCoE).

To be noted that after being selected, some pCoE invited some researchers from other E³UDRES² partner universities⁴.

The reported needs and expectations from the pCoE resulting from their first piloting activities, was important feedback considered when further refining the concept for the CoE, presented in the previous section.

3.2. Second piloting phase

For the first piloting phase described in 3.1, only four of the proposals have been selected due to the lack of capacity of providing, at that time, support to all the ones that showed great potential. However, there have been encouraging signs of activity from some of the groups that were not selected or that did not even apply at that time. Therefore, a second call is foreseen to be launched by Autumn 2025, open to all interested E³UDRES² researchers. The selection of the proposals will be made not later than early 2026. The details of the call will be proposed by the research supporting team to the Executive Board.

The pCoE selected for the second piloting phase will benefit from the lessons learned from the first piloting phase which should boost their development.

4. Methodology for establishing E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence – beyond the piloting phases

The pCoE, selected from any of the piloting phases described earlier, will later undergo an evaluation to become E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence.

In the following subsections, the evaluation committee, the assessment criteria and the proposed timeline are described.

4.1. Evaluation committee

- 1 Representative from Work Package 4
- E³UDRES² Scientific Council⁵

⁴ For the most up to date composition of the pCoE: <https://eudres.eu/research-centers>

⁵ <https://eudres.eu/scientific-council>

- At least 2 members from the E³UDRES² Advisory Board⁶

4.2. Evaluation criteria

The E³UDRES² Applied Research Center of Excellence are evaluated against the following criteria:

A. Team	1. Merit of the core team (5 researchers) Overall quality, European relevance, prior experience leading European R&D&I international projects or at least some of its work packages, prior experience supervising PhD students, practical expertise to guarantee results / outcomes that can actually be used by the societal stakeholders
	2. Innovative potential
	3. Gender balance
	4. Career stage balance

B. Strategy	1. Potential of European added value at an excellent level
	2. Potential regional impact
	3. Proposed governance structure of the future CoE
	4. Potential of financial sustainability
	5. Plans for embracing Open Science
	6. Level of alignment with the selected main E ³ UDRES ² Focus Area

C. Research plan	1. Proposed outputs that generate high regional impact and targeted knowledge transfer
	2. Plans for training new researchers
	3. Translation into education

These criteria follow both the E³UDRES² Research Strategy and the European research and policy trends, including the principles of CoARA⁷ as described in its Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, and therefore should steer the pCoE into the path of being prepared for applying to external funding opportunities.

The weights given to each criterium and sub-criteria will be further discussed by the research supporting team and will be presented in Deliverable 4.2, due in March 2026.

4.3. Timeline for the evaluation

To ensure the evaluation of the pCoEs occurs one year prior to the end of the current Erasmus+ funding phase, so those that will continue may have still some time to consolidate, benefitting from the support from E³UDRES², this is the foreseen timeline:

Month/Year	Activity
March 2026	WP4 prepares template for submission, refines evaluation criteria (weights to be applied to criteria and subcriteria)
April 2026	WP4 communicates to the pCoE the evaluation procedure, including the template and the assessment criteria
September 2026	The pCoE submit to the WP4 representative in the Evaluation Committee the documentation for evaluation

⁶ Or other external experts provided no one from the Advisory Board is available at the time of the evaluation

⁷ <https://coara.eu/agreement/the-agreement-full-text/>

October–November 2026	Evaluation by the Evaluation Committee
November 2026	WP4 representative in the Evaluation Committee submits evaluation results to the Executive Board
December 2026	Executive Board takes decision on which pCoE to be continued based on the evaluation received from the Evaluation Committee

4.4. Number of CoE to be established

According to the Grant Agreement of Erasmus+ funding, a minimum of two CoE will be established.

There is no foreseen maximum number of CoE to be established.

5. Conclusion

The concept for the E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence was defined and a methodology for their establishment was described.

The concept and the methodology will be further refined and presented in Deliverable 4.2, due in March 2026.

To sum up, the foreseen roadmap for establishing the E³UDRES² Applied Research Centers of Excellence is presented in Figure 1.

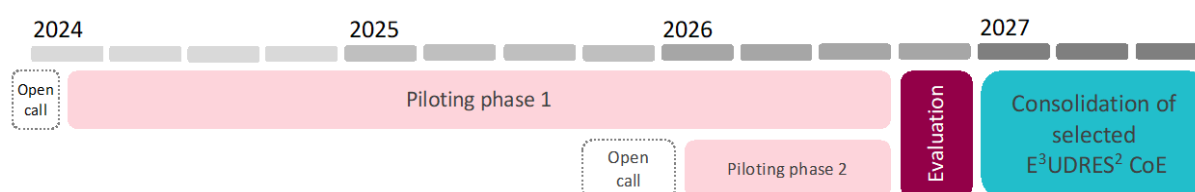


Figure 1 – Roadmap for establishing the E³UDRES² CoE

Appendix A

Open call launched in December 2023 (excerpt of the sections related to the Centers of Excellence).



1. E³UDRES² Open Call for Proposals: Potential Pilots

In October 2023 our European University Alliance E³UDRES² started its second funding period. E³UDRES² intends to **pool expertise and resources** for and with its members¹ within **four future-guiding Focus Areas**:

- 1) **Health, Wellbeing and Social Inclusion for Regions**
- 2) **Digital Solutions and (Applied) Deep Tech for Regions**
- 3) **Resilient Economy and Innovation for Regions**
- 4) **Creative Industries for Region's Identity**

E³UDRES² builds on the complementary strengths of full and associated partners, further deepens, intensifies and expands collaboration with members and related stakeholders, enhances the transformation processes towards a fully-fledged European University Alliance and demonstrates progress towards the alliance's long-term vision.

The following **five strategic core objectives** guide the 2nd stage of E³UDRES² 2.0:

- 1) **Enable Smart Learners to unfold talents**
- 2) **Serve as a platform for collaborative innovation to connect entrepreneurial minds**
- 3) **Engage in regional communities to contribute to a peaceful and prosperous society**
- 4) **Empower Ent-r-e-novators (entrepreneurs, researchers, educators and innovators) to accelerate future universities**
- 5) **Shift to a fully-fledged European university to ensure excellent quality.**

The E³UDRES² 2.0 Erasmus+ project calls for a wider participation of students and staff, scaling up and more systemic approach towards joint learning, research and innovation activities, supported by relevant work packages. The E³UDRES² Executive Board reflects on the urgency of initial steps and piloting some key profiling activities which will be aligned with and supported by systemic arrangements of the project.

Therefore, **E³UDRES² invites all colleagues affiliated with one of its members** to propose ideas and first drafts within the following **three open calls** for:

- Co-Teaching activities with/for partners from the E³UDRES² alliance
- Promising content-areas for Joint E³UDRES² Associate, Bachelor and/or Master Degrees
- E³UDRES² Research Centres of Excellence

¹ St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, Fulda-University of Applied Sciences, Instituto Politecnico de Sétubal, JAMK University of Applied Sciences, UC Leuven-Limburg UAS, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Universitatea Politehnica Timisoara, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences (associated member) and 36 associated partners (including 6 Higher Education Institutions from Ukraine and Western Balkans)

4. Call III: E³UDRES² Research Centres of Excellence. Pilot Phase

E³UDRES² Applied Research Centres of Excellence were proposed within the E³UDRES² 2.0 project as a step to strengthening the research capacity of the E³UDRES² partnership, yet building upon the clear mission and values of the alliance, the expertise of individual higher education institutions, benefitting from possible synergies of shared capacity, achievement of critical mass.

Proposals for the pilot Joint Research Centres of Excellence should connect at least **five acknowledged senior researchers** (incl. Postdoc with relevant track-records) from research groups from at least **three E³UDRES² members**, with some record of **experience with European research projects** in order to strengthen their European visibility and to enhance their capacity for research projects funded under Horizon Europe (or similar). In the view of activities foreseen in the field of doctoral studies it is preferable should at **least one of the involved E³UDRES² member universities** involved have a **right to offer doctoral programmes**⁶ in the relevant field. The proposed research agenda has to correspond to one of the **E³UDRES² focus areas** and to ensure first **joint proposals for Horizon Europe** proposals upcoming in **late 2024 (or early 2025)** as well as **joint research activities** (e.g. joint presentations at relevant international conferences, joint scientific papers in peer-reviewed conference proceedings or journals, joint proposals to calls in Erasmus+ or any other funding-programs) within about 12 months after selection for the pilot phase.

Selected pilot Joint Research Centres of Excellence will contribute to shaping the E³UDRES² frameworks for ongoing and upcoming (research) activities. They will be connected and supported by the ongoing Erasmus+ project for the further development of the E³UDRES² alliance (E³UDRES² 2.0), highlighted on E³UDRES² website and social media channels as well as promoted and consulted by high-ranking representatives of the various E³UDRES² boards. Relevant specific needs, opportunities and challenges will be discussed with members of the E³UDRES² Management Board.

Pilot Research Centres of Excellence selected for the first pilot phase will be evaluated about 24 months after selection. The E³UDRES² Executive Board will decide about continuation based on the results of this evaluation.

⁶ The E³UDRES² 2.0 project includes a goal of launching at least 2 doctoral schools / study programmes and enrolment of at least 30 doctoral students. Identification and development of such programmes is a matter of further discussion, yet these should naturally correspond to the E³UDRES² research capacities.
