



A7.3, O2: Strategy for cooperation projects



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Beneficiaries

- Aalborg University, Denmark
- Dublin City University, Ireland
- Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania
- Linköping University, Sweden
- Tampereen Korkeakoulusäätiö sr, Finland
- Hamburg University of Technology, Germany
- Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal
- Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
- University of Stavanger, Norway
- Università degli Studi di Trento, Italy
- University of Twente, The Netherlands

Abstract

In ECIU University, external funding is seen as key to putting future goals of the alliance into practice, particularly beyond the initial pilot project period. In addition, moving from theory to practice guided by the *ECIU University Vision 2030*¹ needs to match bottom-up interest with strategic goals and planning. The strategy for cooperation projects describes the background and the work leading up to a) the decision to fund two new fte to organize and coordinate external funding initiatives, b) the establishment of an ECIU expert group on educational cooperation policy and programmes and c) working processes and criteria for assessment of calls and proposals within the alliance. The strategy is the main focus of this document, which sets goals and actions for the pilot and start-up phases of the ECIU University strategic roadmap. A handbook for SEPO platform operations will be published as an annex to this strategy by the end of January 2022, coinciding with the launch of the SEPO platform. The handbook will be revised in the first quarter of 2022 following joint meetings of the expert groups.

¹ Adopted by the ECIU Executive Board on the 28th-30th of October 2020: <https://www.eciu.org/about-eciu#vision>

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Symbols, abbreviations and acronyms

AAU	Aalborg University, Denmark
DCU	Dublin City University, Ireland
EC	European Commission
ECIU	European Consortium of Innovative Universities
KTU	Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania
LiU	Linköping University, Sweden
TAU	Tampereen Korkeakoulusäätiö sr, Finland
TUHH	Hamburg University of Technology, Germany
UA	Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal
UAB	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
UiS	University of Stavanger, Norway
UNITN	Università degli Studi di Trento, Italy
UT	University of Twente, Netherlands

1 Introduction

External funding for cooperation projects in higher education is generally understood as funding from external providers acquired mainly through a bottom-up approach, in which an interested group of university staff become engaged in developing a project as a response to a call for proposals from a grant provider. The main driver for applying for EU funding usually is the motivated researcher or teaching staff who wishes to develop, test or explore a field through a European partnership. On the other hand, project proposals applying for funding as responses to calls from EU programmes must match institutional strategies and targets, and acquisition of such external funds is considered meriting at both individual and institutional level.

In ECIU University, external funding is seen as key to putting future goals of the alliance into practice, particularly beyond the initial pilot project period. In addition, moving from theory to practice guided by the *ECIU University Vision 2030*² needs to match bottom-up interest with strategic goals and planning. In order to organize efforts, the Strategic European Projects Office (SEPO) is being set up through WP7. The SEPO will be a unit within the ECIU University that

- a) scouts and presents opportunities within external funding for the ECIU University vice-president groups,
- b) organizes the writing process and supports it through institutional grants offices
- c) creates a community of experts who will train project supporters and work with the ECIU Brussels office to leverage the opportunities of EU programmes

This document explains briefly the background for this new structure and sets goals and actions for the short and intermediate period to clear the path towards a more sustainable alliance. The focus is on grants and tenders, not other sources or types of financial streams.

The deliverable consists of two documents:

- one main document which offers the background for SEPO and the strategic goals and action points,
- and one annex consisting of a SEPO Handbook which details procedures, working processes and roles for the tasks in the platform

This document has been extensively commented, revised, re-written and discussed at the levels of working group and the Management Team. Strategic elements have been discussed at Executive Board meetings. Peer review has been organized as a continuous process through the working group described in 1.1³.

1.1 Background

Grants offices are under pressure to support academic initiatives for external funding proposals. Although most universities in the alliance have well established services, the diversity of funding available as well as the increased demand for professional assistance in the pre- and post-award processes result in a constant shortage of resources.

² Adopted by the ECIU Executive Board on the 28th-30th of October 2020: <https://www.eciu.org/about-eciu#vision>

³ As agreed with the project officer of the ECIU University

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Another challenge for the alliance is the relation between project ideas for specific calls on the one hand, and the content and context of the ECIU Vision 2030 on the other. While researchers and academics are happy to use networks to establish project consortia, they might not be too familiar with the overall ECIU vision and are not likely to align their project ideas with strategic priorities of the alliance.

This strategy aims to address the ambition of alignment of strategic alliance priorities and bottom-up initiatives and propose actions for creating relevant training and networking opportunities.

The process of setting up the SEPO unit started in January 2021, just after the initial report from WP7 on existing EU funded projects in ECIU relating to SDG11 and best practices⁴. A working group consisting of the following members established a forum to explore and organize the process for SEPO establishment:

- Sander Lotze, project director
- Olga Wessels, Head of ECIU Brussels
- Katrin Dirksen, ECIU Secretary General
- Trym N. Holbek, WP7 and Activity 7.3 Lead
- Jörg Langwaldt, Chair of R&I Group
- Greg Hughes, WP2 Lead and head of VP Research Group
- Rachel Barrett, WP2 and DCU Local Ambassador

This working group had 5 meetings on the 13. January, 27. January, 10. February, 24. February and the 17. March to discuss the framework of and preparations for an outline and requirements for SEPO. Supporting structures were also discussed, such as an *ECIU Expert Group on Educational Cooperation Policy and Programmes*, a *VP Education Group* and future investments to match strategic goals and working structures.

On the 19th of March, the ECIU Executive Board decided to support alliance funding for staff equal to 2 fte to support the SEPO platform, and also decided the following:

Strategic European Projects Office (SEPO)

Decision	1. The ECIU University Board acknowledged the ideas on the set-up and processes of the Strategic European Projects Office (SEPO) as an instrument to get more external funding in the ECIU University (SEPO is also a deliverable of the ECIU University project).
Actions	1. SEPO to work out: <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Criteria for deciding what makes an ECIU proposal to be supported by SEPO;b) Transparent process and decision-making on calls to target for ECIU University;c) Open and transparent processes for consortium-building for the calls.

⁴ D7.3.1: Survey and report: Existing education and research projects under SDG 11 for best practices / success stories.

In the following Executive Board meeting 17th-18th of June 2021, further decisions were made concerning extra capacity:

External Capacity Funding

Decision	1. The ECIU University Board approved Scenario B (One fte at a member and one fte in Brussels plus individual institutional commitment to work with these centralized resources) and agreed to hire 2 fte on a central level for a trial period of two years. The work location (Brussels/member university) of the employees is up to the best candidates.
Actions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In general, all member universities to put efforts in getting the own university community involved in ECIU University activities. Related to the new funding capacity, to ensure on the institutional level that each university can take profit out of the efforts of the external funding capacity.2. The ECIU Secretary General to work out indicators for the work of the external funding advisors.3. The ECIU Secretary General to revise the foundation budget if cuts on some assets are possible.

This document presents a plan to implement the decisions by the Board and engage the ECIU University communities to organize and prepare the SEPO platform as the main tool to develop cooperation projects for the ECIU University. This plan is not designed to be a full strategic plan for the future financial investment structure of SEPO towards 2030. Rather, it will propose a timeline for its establishment and key elements of further development until 2024, meaning through the start-up phase of the strategic roadmap.

A revised and more detailed strategy for cooperation projects building on the SEPO structure should be presented to the ECIU Executive Board during the start-up phase.

2 Objectives

The main objective of this deliverable is to describe the outline of SEPO as a structural measure of the ECIU University and to provide a plan for organizing grant scans, strategic decision-making and development of cooperation projects in education, research and innovation in the ECIU University. Taking the recently adopted SEPO structural outline as a point of departure, the document also provides a timeline for development of the SEPO structure within the timeframe of the ECIU University start-up phase of the strategic roadmap.

3 Strategic European Projects Office

3.1 Principles of the SEPO initiative

The ECIU University proposal states the following about the organization of the SEPO platform as a deliverable:

The ECIU University will gradually fill up with new cooperation projects funded by Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and many other national and regional funding schemes. The importance of making the projects work synchronously and provide support for each other cannot be [over]estimated. Erasmus and many other funding schemes are designed to build step-by-step partnerships and alliances. To support and develop cooperation projects in the alliance, a Strategic European Projects Office (SEPO) is established based upon the collaboration of the existing EU working group. This solution is envisaged as a virtual office which will be tasked with examining funding opportunities and propose them to the initiatives of the alliance following needs-based mapping in the other work packages.⁵

Within two years following this description, the new era of policies for the European Education Area, the European Research Area, Digital Agenda and the European Skills Agenda⁶ were communicated from the European Commission. They signal a strong support for synergies between core activities of higher education and aligning with the needs of stakeholders and learners. SEPO will focus on harnessing these synergies for the good of the member institutions and the alliance vision.

4 Goals and action points

The following chapter outlines goals for strategic cooperation projects based on the vision 2030 for the ECIU University. Action lines are given for follow-up in terms of timeline and responsibilities.

4.1 Establish the SEPO platform for strategic proposals

The SEPO will be established as a project support hub by the end of January 2022. The following actions support this platform:

4.1.1 Action 1: Establish ECIU Expert Group on Educational Cooperation Policy and Programmes (Edu Group)

The necessary expertise on educational cooperation funding programmes will be organized through setting up an ECIU Expert Group on Educational Cooperation Policy and Programmes (Edu Group). Together with the R&I Group, this group will form the main working forum of the SEPO platform, establish links to international offices across the alliance and provide training and relevant input to the community. The group is being established as of October 2021, and a first meeting to constitute the group took place on the 21st October where the group agreed on Terms of Reference and elected a chair. This action is included in this updated plan as a necessary action point even though the first meeting has taken place.

Deadline: 31st of December 2021

Responsible: Activity 7.3 Lead

4.1.2 Action 2: Handbook for SEPO operations

The SEPO platform needs working guidelines to become operational, and the following topics should be developed in the format of a handbook to help organize the work.

⁵ ECIU University proposal text pp. 49-50

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/education/>

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- Principles and practical methods to be used to select calls for the VP groups. These criteria for SEPO support to ECIU University proposals must show a connection to the Vision 2030 and other relevant documents or strategic decisions made in the alliance.
- A full description of the working process for selecting calls to target the ECIU University for openness and transparency. The process should be inclusive and be well documented.
- Award criteria in each call will decide the main framework for choosing consortium partners for a proposal. Nevertheless, partner involvement should be based on transparency and knowledge about the general situation and capacity of each institution.

Deadline: 31st of January 2022.

Responsible: 7.3 Activity Lead

4.1.3 Action 2: Acquire funding advisers for extra capacity

The commitment of the ECIU Executive Board on the 19th of March 2021 to fund 2 fte for funding advisers to SEPO was concretized in the decisions of the June Board meeting where

- one European Funding Adviser will be recruited to form part of the SEPO platform to lead and coordinate the joint work based in one of the partner institutions
- one Manager Business Developer will be recruited to be based in Brussels at the ECIU office focusing on business development and strategic stakeholder management

Deadline: 31st of December 2021

Responsible: Director ECIU University for the *Manager Business Developer* and ECIU Secretary General for the *European Funding Adviser*

4.2 Strengthen synergies between research, education and innovation

The EU programmes for external funding in the fields of research and innovation (Horizon Europe) and education (Erasmus+, Digital Europe) are designed to work together to create synergies for the overall missions of HEI and university alliances. They respond to needs in different areas of knowledge production, teaching, learning and exchange, digitalization and provide the key to putting the ECIU University Vision 2030 into practice.

4.2.1 Action 1 – Mapping new initiatives for next funding period

The ECIU University 3-year pilot project under Erasmus+ provides a unique opportunity to create an alliance, but only sets up a framework in which further development and content is needed. More projects must be added and work in synergy with it. This understanding is key for the next funding period of the ECIU University, where the expert groups should reflect on opportunities to join programme calls together with the main EUI funding. The ECIU University will need a position on this to plan new funding initiatives in a strategic perspective.

Deadline: 30th of June 2022

Responsible: European Funding Adviser

4.2.2 Action 2 – Joint training events for support staff

The knowledge community of experts is a feature of the SEPO platform that helps build both a strong pool of expertise and trust between institutions across the alliance. The expert groups will facilitate joint training events

to create well-informed and knowledgeable support structures in our universities. These events follow the good experiences of the R&I Group and will make use of external speakers whenever relevant. Joint events for both the R&I Group and the Edu Group are encouraged.

Deadline: Minimum of one training event per year

Responsible: European Funding Adviser

4.3 Access other funds from national, regional schemes

Although the European grants are at the core of the ECIU University external funding portfolio in the pilot phase, throughout the start-up phase it is necessary to look into opportunities to link national and regional funding schemes. These schemes are linked to national policy and vary greatly between alliance countries. One way of using these funds is to expand on certain topics or areas of interest, or to strengthen bilateral partnerships within the alliance. These can then be used to accelerate parts of the overall alliance priorities.

Deadline: 31st December 2023

Responsible: European Funding Adviser

5 Summary

Key elements of success for the ECIU University alliance are to attract external funding to be at the forefront of higher education, research and innovation in Europe. A solid external funding base is required to build the European university that we envision towards 2030. This strategy has outlined the principles of the SEPO platform and key actions to expand the external funding portfolio of the ECIU University. SEPO is an instrument to create a pool of expertise for the support of grants offices and working processes to align alliance vision with bottom-up initiatives. The handbook annexed to this strategy will detail the working processes, criteria and methods used in the SEPO platform.

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