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Deliverable D6.2

ERA_FABRIC Policy Legacy

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Executive summary

The ERA_FABRIC project set out to address a central governance challenge in the European Research Area (ERA): how to enable effective coordination among regional research and innovation ecosystems, national strategies, and European policy instruments, without creating new institutional structures. Instead of proposing new layers of governance, ERA_FABRIC validated a functional concept: ERA Hubs as coordination nodes capable of translating policy ambition into strategic alignment, stakeholder orchestration, and territorial impact.

This deliverable distills the project's policy legacy. It captures empirical insights, synthesises validated governance functions, and formulates multi-level policy recommendations based on the recurrent features, barriers, and enablers observed throughout the project lifecycle. Drawing from systems thinking and public policy design, the deliverable offers a pragmatic agenda for embedding coordination capacity into Europe's evolving R&I governance landscape.

ERA_FABRIC tested its hypotheses across diverse regional contexts, using typologies, self-assessment tools, stakeholder engagement formats, and impact evaluation frameworks. The findings demonstrate that effective coordination is not contingent on structural novelty, but on institutional clarity, strategic integration, and adaptive learning infrastructures.

Key lessons include:

- Coordination is a function, not a structure; it already exists in many ecosystems but requires recognition and resourcing.
- Effective hubs share common features: clear mandates, multi-level alignment, stakeholder engagement, and blended funding logic.
- Barriers include fragmented responsibilities, short-term financing, and lack of policy incentives for cross-border or cross-level coordination.
- ERA_FABRIC tools and methods enabled regions to assess their readiness, mobilise governance improvements, and position themselves within EU policy cycles.

Based on these insights, this deliverable provides policy recommendations for regional, national, and EU-level actors. It proposes mechanisms for institutionalising coordination functions, aligning funding flows, and embedding ERA Hubs into FP10, cohesion policy, and the ERA Monitoring system.

The legacy of ERA_FABRIC is a framework: a systems-level orientation for building durable, adaptive, and strategically embedded coordination capacity across Europe's innovation ecosystems. This deliverable directly informs the project's final policy brief and provides a foundation for future integration into EU policy implementation processes.

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Abbreviations

EC   European Commission

ERA   European Research Area

ERA Hub   European Research Area Hub

ESIF   European Structural and Investment Funds

EU   European Union

FP10   10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation

IPCEI   Important Project of Common European Interest

KPI   Key Performance Indicator

MFF   Multiannual Financial Framework

R&I   Research and Innovation

RIS3   Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation

Introduction

The long-term effectiveness of European research and innovation (R&I) policy hinges not only on the quality of funding instruments or excellence of projects, but also on the institutional capacity to coordinate, align, and adapt across governance levels. As the European Research Area (ERA) evolves to meet complex transitions, digital, green, social, geopolitical, there is a renewed demand for mechanisms that translate policy ambition into territorial coherence and collective action. ERA_FABRIC was initiated to test, refine, and operationalise the concept of ERA Hubs as such a coordination mechanism. Rather than introducing new administrative structures, the project has sought to define ERA Hubs as a governance function capable of organising distributed capacities into systems of alignment, knowledge circulation, and mission-oriented delivery.

Deliverable 6.2 captures the policy legacy of this approach. It synthesises the insights and validated practices developed through cross-regional experimentation, stakeholder engagement, and analytical toolkits. The deliverable provides a structured agenda of policy recommendations based on real-world lessons, institutional diversity, and functional convergence observed across the project. It is designed as both a standalone output and a foundational contribution to ERA_FABRIC's final policy brief.

Grounded in systems thinking and public policy analysis, the deliverable focuses on the strategic value of coordination capacity. It addresses the challenges that institutions face when trying to govern innovation ecosystems in dynamic, resource-constrained, and multilevel environments. Importantly, it reflects not only the conceptual articulation of ERA Hubs but also the operational conditions under which they can be sustained, scaled, and integrated into broader EU policy logic.

1. Strategic rationale and process

The ERA_FABRIC project was grounded in a clear systems-level hypothesis: that the European Research Area lacks not only funding coherence but operational coordination capacity across levels of governance. While significant policy efforts have targeted fragmentation in research performance and innovation capability, fewer initiatives have addressed the institutional logics that govern how regional ecosystems function, align, and adapt within the ERA. The rationale for ERA Hubs stems from this recognition. In complex policy environments, performance emerges not solely from individual actors or instruments, but from the quality of interaction across systems. ERA Hubs were conceived as territorial coordination functions that could enable regions to align R&I assets, institutional strategies, and funding mechanisms with EU-level objectives—without imposing new structures or administrative burdens.

ERA_FABRIC was designed to validate this concept through empirical testing, systems diagnostics, and stakeholder engagement. The process unfolded across four strategic layers:

I. **Functional testing through typologies**: The project developed and applied a classification of ERA Hub types to reflect different ecosystem maturity levels, governance forms, and coordination logics (D6.1). This provided a common language to evaluate how hub-like functions are already performed or could be strengthened.

II. **Tool development and field validation**: Through Deliverables D2.5 and D4.1, the consortium co-developed and piloted a self-assessment methodology and a catalogue of coordination tools. These instruments were applied by regional actors to test their utility, refine governance roles, and identify gaps.

III. **Impact evaluation and policy mapping**: ERA_FABRIC combined qualitative insights with structured stakeholder feedback (Deliverable D5.3) to evaluate how hub functions contribute to institutional alignment, cross-border collaboration, and systemic impact across diverse regional and national contexts.

IV. **Roadmap design and strategic synthesis**: The Business Plan and Roadmap (Deliverable D6.3) consolidated operational insights into a forward-looking blueprint. It proposes sustainability pathways, financial alignment mechanisms, and scenarios for integration into FP10, cohesion policy, and national strategies.

In parallel, the project maintained a close feedback loop with evolving EU policy frameworks, such as the ERA Policy Agenda, the design of FP10, and cohesion programming post-2027. This iterative alignment ensures that the recommendations in this deliverable are not merely descriptive but policy-relevant and strategically timed. This deliverable thus anchors the ERA_FABRIC policy legacy in a robust methodological foundation, reinforcing the argument that effective ecosystem coordination is both necessary and possible—and that existing infrastructures can be optimised to perform this function with appropriate incentives, recognition, and governance support.

2. Lessons learned and validated functionalities

ERA_FABRIC provided a rare opportunity to test ecosystem coordination as a governance function across multiple contexts. Rather than starting from a normative definition of what ERA Hubs should be, the project derived its insights inductively—from observed practices, systemic gaps, and stakeholder experience. The result is a grounded understanding of what ecosystem coordination looks like in operational terms, and under what conditions it can be sustained.

2.1 Functional convergence across diverse contexts

Despite variation in regional structures, policy instruments, and institutional histories, ERA_FABRIC identified a consistent set of functions that define a high-performing coordination node. These include:

- **Stakeholder orchestration:** the ability to convene, align, and broker interactions across academia, industry, government, and civil society;
- **Strategic alignment**: embedding coordination roles within existing strategies (e.g., RIS3, national R&I frameworks) to ensure directionality and public value;
- **Knowledge translation**: enabling bidirectional flows between policy priorities and local capabilities, including translation of missions into action;
- **Cross-programme mobilisation:** activating complementary funding sources (ESIF, Horizon, national budgets) in support of ecosystem objectives.

These functions do not require new institutional creation. In many cases, they are already partially fulfilled by clusters, innovation agencies, regional development bodies, or university alliances. What ERA_FABRIC validated is the added value of recognising and supporting these actors in a structured, policy-aligned manner.

2.2 Recurrent barriers and institutional bottlenecks

The project also uncovered common structural constraints that limit the effectiveness of coordination, including:

- **Mandate ambiguity**: Coordination often emerges informally, without explicit policy support or recognition in governance frameworks.
- **Funding gaps**: Coordination activities are typically ineligible for direct funding, despite their centrality to policy implementation.
- **Capability asymmetries**: Not all regions possess the same institutional capacity to perform alignment functions, reinforcing disparities.
- **Policy incoherence:** Parallel programmes at EU, national, and regional levels often lack mechanisms for mutual reinforcement.

These findings reinforce a core insight from systems engineering: ***coordination is a cost centre with no natural owner and must be strategically designed into the policy architecture if it is to function effectively.***

2.3 Tested instruments and stakeholder learning

The project's tools, particularly the Self-Assessment and Guidance Tool (D2.5) and the Catalogue of Measures and Tools (D4.1), provided valuable mechanisms for ecosystem actors to diagnose their coordination readiness, test new practices, and learn through iteration. These tools were used not only as assessment devices but as instruments of institutional learning and agenda-setting. Stakeholders reported increased clarity on their roles, improved understanding of funding complementarities, and strengthened relationships across the quadruple helix. In this sense, ERA_FABRIC acted as both an analytical project and a policy rehearsal platform.

3. Policy recommendations: a multi-level agenda

The policy recommendations of ERA_FABRIC reflect both the diversity of regional contexts and the convergence of coordination challenges across Europe. The project has shown that enabling effective ecosystem governance does not require creating new institutional structures, but rather recognising, resourcing, and aligning existing actors capable of delivering coordination functions. These recommendations are structured by governance level, regional, national, and European, and are intended to be actionable, adaptive, and integrated with existing policy frameworks.

3.1 For regional and local policymakers

Objective: Strengthen place-based coordination through institutional mandates, inclusive governance, and strategic integration.

- Recognise coordination as a policy function: Use the ERA_FABRIC self-assessment tool to identify actors with de facto hub roles and formalise their mandates within regional innovation governance structures (e.g., RIS3 platforms).
- Integrate ERA Hub functions into investment logic: Include coordination objectives in regional development strategies and operational programmes, enabling access to structural funds and innovation investments.
- Promote participatory governance: Institutionalise multi-stakeholder engagement in agenda setting and monitoring to reflect Quadruple Helix dynamics.
- Support adaptive capacity: Use toolkits and metrics developed by ERA_FABRIC to foster continuous learning and agile strategy refinement.

3.2 For national policymakers

Objective: Provide enabling conditions for regional coordination through recognition, resourcing, and regulatory clarity.

- Embed ERA Hubs in national innovation strategies: Acknowledge and support regional coordination platforms as delivery mechanisms for national and EU R&I priorities.

- Align funding programmes: Ensure that coordination activities are explicitly eligible under national and interregional funding instruments, including performance-based schemes.
- Design incentives for collaboration: Introduce rewards for cross-regional partnerships, knowledge brokerage, and multi-level policy alignment within national funding calls.
- Facilitate vertical integration: Create joint governance platforms between national agencies and regional actors to align priorities and improve policy feedback loops.

3.3 For EU institutions and policy frameworks

Objective: Institutionalise coordination capacity as a structural pillar of the ERA and future Framework Programme.

- Integrate ERA Hub functionalities into FP10: Recognise coordination roles within project consortia, missions, and partnerships. Include dedicated guidance and eligibility criteria in FP10 templates and work programmes.
- Use ERA Hubs as delivery interfaces: Activate ERA Hubs as operational nodes for missions, strategic autonomy initiatives (e.g., IPCEIs), and cohesion policy objectives.
- Align ERA Monitoring with hub-based intelligence: Include ERA Hubs as data sources and interpretive actors in strategic foresight, evaluation, and policy learning mechanisms.
- Provide a voluntary guidance framework: Build on ERA_FABRIC's typologies and toolkits to support Member States and regions in adopting coordination functions without standardisation.

4. Sustainability and institutional legacy

Sustainability in the context of ERA Hubs is not about permanence of structure, but about durability of function. Coordination roles only persist when they prove useful, adaptable, and strategically embedded within broader policy and institutional frameworks. ERA_FABRIC proposes a sustainability model grounded in functional relevance, systems alignment, and feedback-based institutional design.

4.1 Structural embedding through function, not form

The long-term viability of ERA Hubs hinges on their integration into existing governance systems. This means defining coordination as a policy function, one that is budgeted for, monitored, and evaluated, not as a transient task or branding exercise. Sustainability is achieved when ERA Hub roles become essential to how regions organise their R&I activity, how national strategies are delivered, and how EU policies are interpreted at territorial level. ERA_FABRIC demonstrated that in many contexts, these functions already exist, albeit under different labels. The project's legacy lies in offering a framework to recognise, support, and align these capabilities. This avoids redundancy and supports institutional continuity.

4.2 Financial alignment and policy cohesion

Coordination activities often fall outside traditional funding logics. ERA_FABRIC addressed this gap by proposing flexible financing architectures: combining ESIF for regional capacity-building, Horizon Europe for interregional and mission-driven collaboration, and national programmes for core orchestration roles. Sustainability improves when funding flows reflect the systemic value of coordination, rather than treating it as overhead. This requires alignment not only across instruments, but also across timeframes, so that coordination functions can evolve, scale, and adapt with changing policy demands.

4.3 Anchoring in learning and monitoring systems

Sustainability is not static. ERA Hubs must be designed with adaptive capacity. This includes access to performance monitoring tools, communities of practice, and platforms for foresight and policy learning. ERA_FABRIC's tools (e.g., the Self-Assessment Tool) provide foundational infrastructure for this. By participating in ERA monitoring mechanisms and policy dialogues, hubs can function not only as delivery agents, but as intelligent nodes, capable of interpreting, anticipating, and influencing systemic trends.

4.4 Contribution to ERA and FP10 institutional architecture

The real legacy of ERA_FABRIC lies in positioning coordination as a systemic requirement. As FP10 is being shaped, the integration of ERA Hub functions within project design, policy implementation, and strategic foresight offers a practical way to embed alignment capacity into the European R&I system. This institutional legacy does not rest on the term "ERA Hub" itself. It rests on the recognition that distributed innovation ecosystems require orchestrated governance, rooted in place, connected across levels, and capable of delivering on Europe's long-term missions.

5. Contribution to the Policy Brief

The strategic objective of Deliverable 6.2 is to reflect on ERA_FABRIC's internal lessons, and to contribute a coherent and actionable narrative to the broader European policy dialogue on R&I ecosystem governance. This is realised through the accompanying Policy Brief 2, which distills the project's policy legacy into concise messages for institutional uptake at regional, national, and European levels.

5.1 Supporting the final policy brief

Deliverable 6.2 (together with D6.3) provides the analytical backbone for Policy Brief 2, by:

- Synthesising validated ERA Hub functions and their governance relevance;
- Clarifying the coordination gaps that policy frameworks must address;
- Providing a matrix of policy recommendations matched to institutional roles;

▪ Framing ERA Hubs not as a policy proposal per se, but as a functional solution to systemic fragmentation.

In doing so, the policy brief offers what we hope is a quite compelling narrative: Europe already has many of the elements required for better coordination, what it lacks is a framework to align, scale, and sustain them. ERA_FABRIC offers such a framework, grounded in practice, and aligned with the ERA and FP10 trajectories.

5.2 Strategic orientation for FP10

As Europe moves toward a new multiannual programming cycle (2028–2034), the need for systemic coordination will intensify. ERA_FABRIC's policy legacy anticipates this by proposing ERA Hubs as:

▪ Anchors of territorial intelligence, informing policy implementation and strategic foresight;
▪ Mechanisms of multi-level alignment, connecting regional assets to EU missions and industrial transitions;
▪ Interfaces for distributed governance, capable of enabling flexibility without losing coherence.

The next step is not to formalise ERA Hubs as a new institutional layer, but to enable ecosystems to perform coordination roles with clarity, support, and strategic purpose. This deliverable outlines the conditions for doing so and sets the foundation for ERA Hubs to become lasting components of the European research and innovation fabric.