



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



ERA HUBS: TURNING ALIGNMENT INTO IMPACT

This policy brief presents the key policy insights and legacy of the ERA_FABRIC project. It argues that the success of FP10 will depend not only on its ability to fund scientific excellence, but on how effectively it empowers coordination across Europe's research and innovation ecosystems. Drawing on practical evidence, the brief outlines how ERA Hubs can serve as strategic interfaces, aligning local capacities with EU priorities, enhancing policy coherence, and translating ambition into collective outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge ecosystems represent one of Europe's most strategic assets. They drive innovation, attract talent, support industrial transformation, and translate research into societal value. Yet across the EU, these ecosystems operate within a fragmented policy landscape, shaped by diverse governance models, uneven institutional capacity, and limited cross-programme coordination. As Europe prepares for its next strategic cycle, through FP10, Smart Specialisation 2.0, and the renewed ERA agenda, there is a growing demand for mechanisms that enhance alignment, integration, and place-based delivery of research and innovation (R&I) policy.

ERA Hubs respond to this demand. Conceived not as new institutional bodies, but as a coordination function that builds on existing structures, ERA Hubs offer a pragmatic model for synchronising regional innovation ecosystems with European priorities. They operate as interfaces that connect local actors with EU missions, channel funding from diverse programmes, and ensure that research translates into impact across territories.

The ERA_FABRIC project tested this model in practice. Through pilots across multiple governance contexts, ERA_FABRIC explored how coordination can be institutionalised, financed, and embedded into existing policy cycles. The project showed that many regions already host capable actors, clusters, development agencies, university alliances, that can perform hub-like functions. What is often missing is clarity of mandate, policy recognition, and operational support.

This policy brief translates those findings into actionable guidance. It situates ERA Hubs within current policy frameworks, identifies implementation pathways, and proposes strategies to integrate coordination roles into the future architecture of the ERA and FP10. Rather than calling

for structural reform, it offers a roadmap for aligning what already exists, and turning Europe's distributed innovation assets into a cohesive, mission-ready fabric.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The ERA_FABRIC project demonstrated that coordination is both the greatest unmet need and the most under-supported function in Europe's innovation governance landscape. This insight was consistently validated across regional pilots, stakeholder engagements, and institutional assessments. It reveals a structural gap that limits the ERA's ability to translate policy priorities into territorial alignment and collective outcomes.

1. Strong demand for coordination roles across ecosystems

Regional and national stakeholders repeatedly confirmed the need for a visible coordination function to link EU R&I priorities with local capacities. This demand is particularly evident in mission-related activities, smart specialisation updates, and cohesion policy programming. The function is needed in all regions, but the institutional pathways vary based on governance maturity, policy coherence, and stakeholder density.

2. ERA Hubs exist in practice, though often without formal mandate

Many regions already host institutions capable of performing ERA Hub roles—regional development agencies, clusters, university alliances, or innovation councils. However, these actors often lack a policy mandate, funding continuity, or integration with EU programmes. The ERA_FABRIC Self-Assessment Tool revealed that what limits impact is not institutional absence, but lack of recognition and systemic alignment.

3. Coordination capacity remains structurally underfunded

Funding programmes prioritise project delivery, not orchestration. ERA_FABRIC identified gaps in how coordination functions are financed, especially across funding sources such as ESIF, Horizon Europe, and national instruments. Despite the critical role these functions play in enabling impact, they are rarely eligible as standalone objectives.

4. Institutional learning and peer exchange are essential enablers

Regions benefit from structured tools and shared benchmarks. ERA_FABRIC piloted a catalogue of coordination instruments and created communities of practice that improved cross-border learning and accelerated adoption. These infrastructures proved critical in translating abstract policy goals into actionable institutional change.

5. ERA Hubs are compatible with, and complementary to, existing platforms

Rather than duplicating the work of networks like EEN, EDIHs, or S3 partnerships, ERA Hubs can function as the coordination layer that aligns and integrates their efforts. They provide a horizontal interface that enhances visibility, ensures alignment with broader R&I goals, and reduces duplication across fragmented initiatives.

These findings confirm that ERA Hubs represent a governance solution whose value lies in function, not form. The next section offers policy recommendations to ensure that this function becomes a permanent, supported feature of Europe's R&I architecture.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise coordination as a policy function, not an administrative cost

- Embed ERA Hub roles within existing institutions, regional agencies, clusters, university consortia, where coordination already takes place.
- Make these roles visible in EU and national strategies, including FP10 templates and ERA monitoring systems.

- Coordination should not be the invisible infrastructure of innovation, it should be planned, supported, and measured.

2. Enable eligibility and flexible financing for orchestration roles

- Update programme guidance to include coordination activities as eligible costs across Horizon, ESIF, and national innovation funds.
- Support hybrid funding models that combine public investment with service-linked resources and mission-driven projects. Provide stable, baseline funding for ecosystems performing recognised ERA Hub functions, especially in regions with emerging capacity.

3. Connect, don't duplicate: ERA Hubs as integrators of existing platforms

- Use ERA Hubs to align efforts across EEN, EDIHs, S3 partnerships, and other initiatives—not to replace or compete with them.
- Act as a “horizontal spine” that brings coherence to dispersed efforts within a region or across borders.
- Map overlaps, identify coordination gaps.
- Support integrated governance approaches tailored to regional realities.

4. Invest in institutional learning and strategic intelligence

- Support the uptake of ERA_FABRIC tools, including the Self-Assessment Framework and Coordination Tool Catalogue.
- Provide technical assistance, peer coaching, and targeted capacity-building for coordination professionals.
- Create learning pathways across regions, especially between more and less experienced innovation systems.

5. Build sustainability through integration, not permanence

- Avoid creating new structures where existing institutions can evolve into coordination roles.
- Encourage policy-makers to define hub mandates based on value-added:
 - Strategic alignment;
 - Funding coherence;
 - Systemic learning.
- Make hubs part of the policy infrastructure, not project-specific artefacts.
- Measure success by the outcomes they enable, not their visibility.

SUSTAINABILITY AND LEGACY

ERA_FABRIC leaves behind a tested, adaptable, and policy-aligned framework for enabling systemic coordination across Europe's innovation ecosystems. Rather than proposing a single institutional model, the project has provided a modular toolbox that regional and national actors can use to define, strengthen, and sustain ERA Hub functions according to local realities.

Key legacy tools include:

- **The ERA Hub Self-Assessment and Guidance Tool**, enabling regions to evaluate their coordination maturity and identify actionable improvements.
- **A Catalogue of Coordination Instruments**, offering implementation-ready measures to enhance stakeholder orchestration, strategic alignment, and policy integration.
- **A Business Plan and Roadmap**, outlining governance models, financing strategies, and performance metrics tailored to diverse contexts.
- **Policy integration matrices and institutional mapping methods**, designed to help align hub roles with FP10, RIS3, and cohesion policy.

The sustainability of ERA Hubs depends on their strategic usefulness. When embedded in funding logics, policy mandates, and governance platforms, hub roles become essential, not optional, to delivering Europe's R&I ambitions. ERA_FABRIC invites policy actors to treat coordination as a capability to be grown, not a structure to be imposed.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED DELIVERABLES

- Obj. 1 Enlist and engage an EU-wide population of Quadruple Helix actors and stakeholders in the co-design of the ERA_FABRIC community of interest.
- Obj. 2 Schedule a plan of P2P learning events to ensure a true and consistent exchange of knowledge among the project partners and with their community members
- Obj. 3 Exploit the existing, EU-wide and international networks of the consortium members to raise the awareness and increase the visibility of the ERA_FABRIC project, its aims and achievements
- Obj. 4 Explore and substantiate with field evidence the concept of ERA Hubs as Knowledge Ecosystems
- Obj. 5 Develop and structure real-life instantiation of the concept of ERA Hubs as Multi-Stakeholder Platform
- Obj. 6 Select a combination of existing and innovative instruments for the implementation of the concept of ERA Hubs' Policy Co-Creation Toolbox.
- Obj. 7 Monitor and evaluate the project activities and their results, including gender balance and standardisation potential
- Obj. 8 Define a replicable model for ERA Hubs as Knowledge Ecosystems, Multi Stakeholder Platform, and Policy Toolbox
- Obj. 9 Communicate and disseminate project activities and results to accompany the development of the ERA_FABRIC community towards its impact targets

D1.1	Quality guidelines
D1.2	Gender and ethical requirements
D1.3-4	Data Management Plan
D2.1	Knowledge ecologies for territorial value creation
D2.2	EU Place-based R&I ecosystems
D2.3	Stakeholder survey results
D2.4	ERA_FABRIC partner profiles
D2.5	ERA_FABRIC self assessment and guidance tool
D3.1	Stakeholder mapping in the ERA_FABRIC regions
D3.2	R&I policies and strategies in the ERA_FABRIC regions
D3.3	Syllabus of ERA_FABRIC training facility
D3.4	Multi-stakeholder platform governance manual
D4.1	Catalogue of measures and tools
D4.2	ERA Hubs Theory of Change
D5.1	Monitoring and evaluation methodology
D5.2-3	Impact and outcome evaluation results
D5.4	ERA_FABRIC Quality label
D6.1	Classification of ERA Hub schemes
D6.2	ERA_FABRIC policy legacy
D6.3	ERA_FABRIC business plan and roadmap
D7.1	Communication and dissemination plan
D7.2-3	ERA_FABRIC policy briefs
D7.4	Updated Communication and Dissemination Plan

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The overarching aim of the ERA_FABRIC project was to define, structure, populate and validate the “interconnected knowledge space” foreseen by the ERA Hubs initiative. For this purpose three distinct, and intertwined, dimensions, all of them relevant for policy making, have been adopted as a structuring principle for the community to be built and cultivated during the project:

1) ERA Hubs as Knowledge Ecosystems: fostering the dynamic interaction of R&D and innovation actors at regional and multiregional levels, taking into account the different knowledge and cultural contexts and the alignment of research foci and industrial needs;

2) ERA Hubs as Multi Stakeholder Platforms: bringing together the representatives of the various involved interest groups in a seamless and uninterrupted discussion and deliberation on strategic priorities, actions and results evaluation;

3) ERA Hubs as a Policy Co Creation Toolbox: a transformative set of measures and tools operating in a “middle ground” needing to be configured as a distinct space from both the EU and the MS/Regional levels, historically presided over by “ad hoc” sets of instruments (e.g. Framework Programmes for R&I, Structural and Investment Funds, Interregional and Cross Border Cooperation Programmes).

The project execution confirmed the consortium’s vision and assumption that these 3 dimensions should be presided over and made interoperable, in order for the ERA Hubs initiative to become path breaking and impactful at broad EU level.

From the methodology point of view the ERA_FABRIC approach was based on the Theory of Change: this is a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes, and context of a new policy intervention. It involves the specification of an explicit theory of how and why an intervention might cause an effect, which is used to guide understanding. It does this by investigating the relationships between context-input-output-outcomes-impacts in order to understand the combination of factors that has led to the intended or unintended outcomes and impacts. The ERA_FABRIC Theory of Change, therefore, working both at both analytical and empirical level, developed and tested a model of intervention and allowed this eventually to be modified or refined through an evaluation process, to identify the mechanisms that may help the model make an impact.

In practical terms, the ERA_FABRIC work plan has been carried out according to the following principles:

- **Requirement analysis.** In order to gain the necessary insights into the needs of the local/regional sites, a deep analysis of the actors and stakeholders, their needs, the gaps and limitations of the policy plans and instruments in place, was carried out by each partner in the respective community with special attention to data gathering for the purpose of benchmarking, monitoring and evaluation. This requirement gathering was a continuous activity, supported by the numerous events and surveys organised by the consortium also for validation and verification purposes.
- **Early definition of a “middle ground” model.** Once the AS-IS situation was clarified, a preliminary version of the ERA Hub model was drafted out, and then refined with the contribution of interregional working groups involving Quadruple Helix stakeholders .
- **Monitoring and evaluation for evidence based implications.** The ERA Hubs model was tested empirically according to domain specific KPIs generated bottom up from the partner discussion. An exhaustive evaluation exercise was eventually conducted via a European wide survey and interviews to relevant stakeholders of the partner regions. The feedback collected led to adjustments of the initial model and supported the final considerations aimed at capitalisation of results and a roadmap to policy mainstreaming.

ERA_FABRIC PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Framing And Bridging Regional research and Innovation ecosystems Capacities for a renewed ERA - ERA_FABRIC
COORDINATOR	ART-ER, Bologna, IT - mariagrazia.zucchini@art-er.it
CONSORTIUM	ADRVN Agentia de Dezvoltare Regionala Nord-Vest, Romania CNR-ISSiFRA, Italy ECOPLUS Niederösterreichs Wirtschaftsagentur GmbH, Austria Fundació EURECAT, Spain INESCTEC, Portugal Masarykova Univerzita, Czech Republic Norges Teknisk-Naturvitenskapelige Universitet, Norway Politechnika Warszawska, Poland Trondheim Tech Port, Norway University of Split, Croatia
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BUDGET	EU contribution: 1 429 975 €.
WEBSITE	https://erafabric.eu/
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Maria Grazia Zucchini, ART-ER, IT - mariagrazia.zucchini@art-er.it
FURTHER READING	Current and forthcoming publications available at the project website



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