

Draft orientations towards the 'main' work programme 2026-2027

Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area

1. Destination title: *Reforming and enhancing the European Research and Innovation system*

Draft expected impacts:

All expected impacts will contribute toward strengthening R&I capacity in the European Research Area (ERA) to enhance Europe's resilience and competitiveness. The impacts pertain to supporting a diverse range of organisations and R&I systems in implementing reforms in line with the ERA objectives:

- Strong ecosystems and partnerships built around ERA priorities with enhanced institutional cooperation, coordination and alignment in the ERA and beyond;
- Effective implementation of institutional changes in line with ERA priorities through broad availability and accessibility of tools, resources and guidelines and increased capacities and skills;
- Strengthened monitoring and evaluation of progress and evidence-based policy-making by creating new evidence and knowledge about the implementation of ERA policies;
- More innovative, efficient and comprehensive approaches to implementing ERA priorities by enabling activities that address multiple policy areas;
- More efficient, trustworthy, transparent and inclusive research practices;
- Improved quality, performance and impact of research, researchers and institutions;
- Improved employability and more attractive and sustainable research careers, including increased inter-sectoral mobility;
- Increased inclusive gender equality, diversity and inclusiveness in the ERA;
- Increased trust in science and alignment of R&I with society's needs, expectations and values.
- Increased efficiency and support to researchers and institutions in addressing ethics and integrity challenges arising out of the rapid spread of AI and digitalisation of research methods, and the new ethical challenges raised by new and emerging technologies.

Main expected outcomes:

The expected outcomes will support researchers, R&I organisations and ecosystems in implementing specific ERA priorities.

Research careers

- More attractive research careers, including as a result of improved working conditions;
- Establishment or enhancement of talent ecosystems, aligned with the new research careers framework and the European Charter for Researchers;
- Researchers prepared for careers in all sectors and receiving support to identify career paths;

Research management

- Increased recognition of the research manager profession across sectors;

- Broad access to educational materials, alongside upskilling tools for research managers, and access to training and certification programmes for both current and aspiring professionals;
- Better awareness of existing schemes for professional development and career paths through improved networking with research managers in the private sector through a triangle approach (public RPO-RFO and industry);

Research assessment

- Effective operations of the various bodies of CoARA and sharing of information, mutual learning and awareness raising, across the members of CoARA, its bodies, and beyond;
- Action Plans of signatories of the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment are implemented;

Trust in science

- Improved public engagement and science communication, and cooperation of researchers with civil society, policymakers and communicators;
- Improved framework conditions for integrating citizen science into policy;
- Co-creation of innovative ways for engaging young people with science;

Open science

- Increased equity, diversity and inclusivity in open science practices through training materials, best practices, awareness raising, evidence base and pathways for inclusion;
- Journals, books, and monographs of scholarly societies transitioned into open access non-profit publishing models, accompanied by lessons learned on the processes, requirements, and appropriate business models for enabling such transitions;
- Improved quality, transparency, recognition, equity and non-bias in peer-review for scientific publishing;
- Improved EOSC interoperability framework and EOSC positioned as the European component of a Global Open Research Commons;
- Increased number of EU research organisations with policies on open access publications (including clauses for rights retention) and higher share of research publications in open access;
- Higher reproducibility of scientific results through field-specific recommendations, direct replication of research findings, and exchange of best practices;

Inclusive gender equality

- Enhanced uptake, quality and effectiveness of inclusive GEPs and policies, including strengthened policy coordination and increased institutional capacity to design, implement, monitor and evaluate GEPs and policies;
- Increased knowledge and capacity to integrate and monitor the gender and intersectional dimension, gender expenditures tracking and gender budgeting in R&I;
- More knowledge and evidence about impacts of (inclusive) GEPs, aspects hindering structural change, the new emerging aspects and gaps, including in the private R&I.

Ethics

- New expertise and ethics frameworks in a digital context related to inclusion, vulnerability and well-being, and to the development of critical (digital) technologies and mitigating new vulnerabilities;
- Strengthened capacity and reform of research ethics and research integrity offices by supporting networks, training, programmes for researchers and research ethics experts;
- Robust expertise on benefit sharing and the prevention of ethics dumping and further uptake of the TRUST code at EU and international level;

Knowledge valorisation

- Strengthened cooperation between R&I actors and public authorities for knowledge valorisation, including experimentation for supporting innovation and policy uptake;
- Innovative approaches to knowledge valorisation with citizen engagement to enable innovative solutions to reach broader, Europe-wide audiences and find support to enter the market;
- More evidence and knowledge sharing of how knowledge valorisation improves people's lives (knowledge valorisation success stories);

Environmentally sustainable science

- New network/platform of research institutes for sustainable research practices, developing guidelines for assessing the ecological impact of research, identifying best practices and fostering knowledge sharing on sustainable research activities;

Foresight

- Strengthened European foresight community, incl. its long-term vision, through networking, capacity building and co-creation and establishing R&I foresight hubs.
- Improved foresight literacy targeting different types of users, including younger generations to raise awareness of foresight as an educational and policy tool, as well as a career.

Addressing main policy priorities:

The guiding policy framework of Destination “Reforming and enhancing the EU research and innovation system” of the WIDERA work programme (ERA WP) is the Council Recommendation on the Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe¹ and the second ERA Policy Agenda (2025-2027)².

The transition towards an ERA-policy driven approach, i.e., full alignment of the ERA WP with the Pact for R&I and the ERA Policy Agenda, was phased in during the programming period of 2023-2025, with WPs 2023-2024 and 2025 being structured according to Pact priorities and most funded actions supporting the implementation of the first ERA Policy Agenda (2023-2024)³.

The ERA WP 2026-2027 will continue this approach, i.e., it will be designed to deliver on the priorities set out in the Pact for R&I and the actions of the second ERA Policy Agenda (2025-2027). WP actions will be

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021H2122>.

² Commission Recommendation on the second ERA Policy Agenda (2025-2027) will be adopted in Q2 2025.

³ https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/ec_rtd_era-policy-agenda-2021.pdf.

prioritised accordingly, while ensuring complementarities with activities funded under other work programme parts (e.g., Widening, Research Infrastructures, Pillar II) and those driven by Member States.

In accordance with the policy framework, the ERA WP 2026-2027 will continue to support the development of the ERA, fostering the fifth freedom of movement of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology, to be better able to address global challenges and boost Europe's competitiveness. It thereby contributes to the Commission's priority "A new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness". The ERA WP will also address the political guidelines to create attractive career perspectives for researchers with several actions supporting the implementation of the Council Recommendation (2023) on a "European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talent in Europe"⁴.

The WP will increase capacities at the level of institutions and R&I systems to implement reforms addressing multiple ERA priorities. It will also support the uptake of shared EU values and principles such as ethics and integrity of R&I, societal responsibility, gender equality and inclusiveness.

The ERA WP will take into account the proposed structure of the next ERA Policy Agenda comprising of 11 structural policies (long-term ERA policies) and 8 ERA actions (new initiatives that have 3-year work plans)⁵. This WP will support 9 out of 19 proposed ERA structural policies/ERA actions, namely:

Structural policies:

- Enabling open science via sharing and re-use of data, including through EOSC
- Strengthening inclusive and intersectional gender equality in the ERA
- Making research careers more attractive and sustainable
- Reforming Research Assessment
- Upscaling knowledge valorisation capacities and activities
- Enhancing trust in science through citizen participation, engagement and science communication

ERA Actions:

- Equity in open science
- A harmonised and coordinated framework for a European approach to integrity and ethics in R&I in the face of emerging challenges
- Empowering Research and Innovation: A New Era in Research Management

A limited number of actions will be included that do not address the second ERA Policy Agenda, but are aligned with the principles and priorities set out in the Pact for R&I, for example:

- Environmentally sustainable science: Addresses the principle of societal responsibility, including achieving greater environmental impact; Addresses the priority area of challenge-based actions, including supporting the goals of the green transition.
- R&I foresight: Addresses the principle of evidence-informed and future-oriented policymaking.

⁴ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202301640.

⁵ To be adjusted according to the final list of structural policies and ERA actions adopted in Q2 2025.

ERA work programme 2026-2027 architecture

The proposed WP architecture aims to address the multiple policy priorities while following the new Commission guidelines for simplification, including through less prescriptive calls and piloting new approaches (in view of FP 10).

2026 call will include targeted, top-down interventions that directly address the new ERA Actions and ERA structural policies (indicative call opening in December 2025 and closing in March 2026). The call topics are organised around four pillars (see table below). Each pillar will include a small number of topics that share the overall approach in terms of aims and activities. Where feasible, the portfolio approach will be used to address multiple policy areas within one topic (cf., planned topic HORIZON-WIDERA-2025-06-ERA-01). In a concerted and comprehensive effort, the projects funded under the pillars will strengthen capacities of ERA stakeholders across four complementary dimensions.

Pillar I: Institutional changes (CSA)	Pillar II: Ecosystems (CSA)
<p><u>Aim:</u> Capacity building and technical assistance to foster adoption of policies/practices within institutions in ERA.</p> <p><u>Indicative activities:</u> tools, resources and guidelines, training, cascading grants, quality assurance programmes, mentoring, certification.</p> <p><u>Indicative areas:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open access policies and publishing• Research assessment reform• Environmentally sustainable science• Ethics and integrity in R&I• Inclusive GEPs and policies	<p><u>Aim:</u> Building and reinforcing networks and communities of practice to foster broad uptake of policies/practices within and beyond ERA.</p> <p><u>Indicative activities:</u> conferences, seminars, trainings, collaborative projects, consensus building, policy advice.</p> <p><u>Indicative areas:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research management• Gender and inclusiveness policy• Cooperation with public authorities for knowledge valorisation• Equitable, sustainable and ethical research• R&I foresight

<p>Pillar III: Citizens and Science (CSA)</p> <p><u>Aim:</u> Connecting R&I with citizens and other stakeholders to increase trust in science and relevance and impact of science in ERA.</p> <p><u>Indicative activities:</u> programmes, events, policies and guidelines that implement/promote participatory approaches, co-creation, citizen science.</p> <p><u>Indicative areas:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upscaling knowledge valorisation capacities and activities • Public engagement in R&I and science communication • Citizen science for policymaking 	<p>Pillar IV: New knowledge for ERA (RIA)</p> <p><u>Aim:</u> Creating new knowledge that supports design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ERA policies.</p> <p><u>Indicative activities:</u> develop/improve research approaches, methodologies, processes, solutions, technical specifications, testing/demonstration.</p> <p><u>Indicative areas:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics and integrity of new and emerging technologies • Reproducibility in research • Gender and intersectional dimension, budgeting and expenditures tracking in R&I • Research careers
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2027 call that addresses only ERA structural policies (indicative call opening in December 2025 and closing in March 2026) and includes a small number of large call topics:

- Talent ecosystems for attractive early research careers (following pilot topic 2024-ERA-02-03);
- Science comes to town 2029 (recurrent action);
- Bottom-up topic that invites R&I communities to propose activities that complement the 2026 top-down topics and address the priorities of the Pact for R&I, share knowledge on achievements, and that generate new approaches that can be taken up in the third ERA Policy Agenda and the next framework programme (e.g., experimenting with actions that can be rolled out at scale in thematic contexts).

Other types of actions in ERA WP 2026-2027

A number of actions not subject to calls for proposals will be included, for example, the following recurrent actions:

- Procurement: She Figures
- Procurement: Policy Support Facility
- Procurement: HRS4R
- Procurement: Implementation of ERA monitoring
- Grant to identified beneficiary: Support to CoARA
- Grant to identified beneficiary: Inspiring ERA
- Prize: EU Award for Gender Equality Champions