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ENGAGE.EU Strategy towards 2035

ENGAGE.EU

The European University Engaged in Societal Change

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0. Executive Summary

Europe is at a critical junction. Confronted with global power shifts, technological disruption, and geopolitical uncertainty, the continent must strengthen its capacity to innovate, collaborate and create value. Higher education institutions are not only knowledge producers – they are strategic actors in shaping Europe’s competitiveness and resilience.

Our Strategy towards 2035 is built on a clear ambition: to make higher education a driving force in Europe’s ability to attract, develop and retain talent; innovation; and sustainable growth. ENGAGE.EU’s distinct contribution lies in enabling innovation using the social sciences, bringing a unique profile to Europe’s knowledge landscape.

We believe that Europe’s future depends on its ability to:

- **lead in global innovation and knowledge creation** through research and education that respond to societal and economic needs;
- **build strategic partnerships across borders and sectors** to deliver collaborative solutions to shared societal challenges;
- **develop a learning and innovation environment** that equips learners, researchers, and societal actors with the tools necessary to shape – not just adapt to – the future.

ENGAGE.EU will deliver on this agenda through four strategic priorities:

- 1) Advanced Learning Powered by European Society** – building a dynamic educational portfolio rooted in European values, reducing barriers to mobility, and empowering learners and staff as co-creators of knowledge.
- 2) Research as a Driver of Societal Transformation** – establishing

interdisciplinary research networks, connecting with societal partners, and empowering researchers to co-create solutions for Europe’s major transitions.

- 3) Societal Engagement as a Bridge Between Knowledge and Action** – embedding deep and long-term partnerships with businesses, governments, and communities, positioning ENGAGE.EU as a trusted knowledge partner in strengthening democracies and social cohesion.

- 4) A Collaborative and Resilient Alliance Architecture** – creating governance, funding and operational structures that connect education, research and engagement; reduce fragmentation; and ensure long-term sustainability.

By 2035, ENGAGE.EU will be a leading European Universities alliance that:

- empowers a new generation of engaged citizens and professionals;
- strengthens Europe’s position as a global knowledge region;
- drives societal transformation through education, research, and engagement.

This Strategy is not only a roadmap for the Alliance – it is a call to action. It shows how ENGAGE.EU will help Europe remain a continent of relevance, resilience, and renewal. Societal challenges matter, but it is through innovation and competitiveness that Europe will shape global progress.



1. Introduction ENGAGE.EU Alliance

Our Alliance operates in a complex and evolving environment characterised by geopolitical instabilities, economic pressures and societal changes. Persistent productivity gaps, high energy costs and complex regulations threaten Europe's competitiveness while rapid technological and environmental transitions put pressure on social cohesion and democratic resilience. Protectionist policies are increasingly undermining the openness of academic collaboration by constraining the free movement of people, ideas, and research. Meanwhile, shifts in global power challenge Europe's ability to uphold its values and maintain its distinctive role in the world. These developments pose direct risks to the Alliance's mission and collaborative potential, requiring resilience, adaptability, and a continued commitment to cross-border engagement.

In response to these challenges, the future direction of ENGAGE.EU has been set with the objective to drive Europe's transformation.

A Broad-Based Approach for Societal Impact

Our Alliance brings together ten universities with distinct traditions and priorities, unified by a fundamental commitment: to actively contribute to **shaping the future of society**. With a strong foundation in **business, economics and the social sciences** and other disciplines such as **humanities, law, public health and STEAM**, we are uniquely positioned to understand and respond to understand and advance societal transformations. This **broad knowledge base** enables ENGAGE.EU to understand and respond to complex societal challenges. We develop practical, evidence-

based solutions that reflect the economic, social, environmental and digital dimensions of these issues.

To make this ambition a reality, we invest in deliberate implementation. This includes structural support, targeted training, and mechanisms that enable effective interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration to ensure that societal, economic, and technical perspectives are effectively integrated. Guided by the principle of **broad prosperity**, our approach builds on the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. By collaboration we go beyond and bring a unique profile to the table: enabling innovation with the use of the social sciences.

Our Strategy towards 2035 is to establish ENGAGE.EU as a leading European Universities alliance to drive societal transformation by **tackling major societal challenges** and promoting the **mindset of European citizens** within Europe and the world.

Values and Strategic Capacities That Shape Us

The Alliance is anchored in European values. These values guide our actions, our choices, our individual and collective responsibilities, and our future. We believe in free research and treasure academic freedom, pluralism, and open debate. Through our work, we aim to contribute to social cohesion, equality of opportunity, and sustainable development. We are committed to promoting democratic and societal participation, and we recognize the importance of collaboration.

To remain effective in a rapidly evolving context, we embrace strategic agility in the design and delivery of our educational and research activities. This enables timely and meaningful responses to societal, technological and geopolitical



developments while remaining firmly grounded in our shared values and long-term mission.

Academic excellence remains a non-negotiable element of all the Alliance's initiatives and activities, safeguarding the quality and credibility of all outcomes. Our values will play an integral role in our educational programmes, research priorities and engagement with societal partners, so that ENGAGE.EU graduates and research outputs actively contribute to strengthening the European democracy and social cohesion.

Regional Roots, European Reach

Our institutions are characterised by strong links to our **regional ecosystems**, consisting of the business sector, public institutions and various stakeholder groups. By building inter-regional linkages between our regional ecosystems, we fulfil the function of central actors in the knowledge square, **accelerating and strengthening regional development** in Europe.

Global Collaboration With Purpose

ENGAGE.EU is a European Universities alliance with an open and outward-looking mindset. We actively seek global collaboration opportunities that strengthen our mission - for instance through joint research proposals, thematic projects, or by engaging students and societal partners from Europe and beyond.

Grounded in our academic excellence and regional ecosystems and supported by global collaborations, we operate at the interface between science and society and between the local and global trends. From this position, we strive to understand and shape complex societal change. In other words, we are ENGAGED by design: **engagement is in our DNA.**



2. Strategy Towards 2035

The Dual Dynamic Approach as the Backbone of Our Strategy

In order to play an active role in shaping major transitions in Europe and around the world, ENGAGE.EU is building a dynamic ecosystem that combines **joint, consolidated structures** with **space for bottom-up experimentation**. This dual dynamic approach forms the backbone of our Strategy, enabling the Alliance to pursue long-term, systemic goals while remaining responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities.

To ensure that the Alliance's activities remain **firmly anchored** in the evolving strategic trends and needs of universities and their regional ecosystems, ENGAGE.EU will embrace a culture of experimentation and piloting. This will be supported by a flexible, adaptable and responsive infrastructure.

The Alliance will focus its collaborative efforts on a set of shared **thematic priorities and high-impact initiatives**. These themes will be identified through an agile and forward-looking process, shaped by an ongoing dialogue between academic communities and societal partners, in response to the increasing demand for solutions to address major societal issues and European policy objectives while respecting academic freedom.

ENGAGE.EU will combine this thematic orientation with **flexible modes of collaboration**. Some initiatives will be designed and implemented jointly by all or most partners - forming core pillars of activity that provide structure and visibility. Others may begin as small-scale experiments between two or more institutions, exploring new ideas or formats that can later be scaled up or adapted. Both approaches are vital and mutually supportive: stable programmes create room for innovation,

and successful experiments can evolve into shared initiatives.

By doing this, we ensure that the Alliance remains both **anchored and adaptive**, capable of shaping long-term impact while staying attuned to the ever-changing landscape of higher education and society.

2.1. Advanced Learning Powered by European Society

For our Alliance, learning is not just about transferring knowledge; it is also about cultivating and equipping people with the skills and competencies to become independent thinkers and responsible citizens who actively contribute to a better European society. Therefore, ENGAGE.EU considers itself to be a **challenge-based European learning space** that unites different perspectives and reinforces European values. This learning space promotes a culture of prototyping, allowing successful educational models to be shared and scaled up across institutions and beyond.

By aligning institutional strengths and generating outcomes no single partner would be able to achieve alone, ENGAGE.EU ensures that education goes beyond the transfer of research-based knowledge by enriching and reinforcing this knowledge through real-world societal challenges and collaborations. It provides learners with exposure to a variety of learning environments, teaching methods and new social contexts. This lays the groundwork for a new generation of learners to act as socially engaged European citizens who serve society at large. That is why we have set ourselves the following goals:

Designing a Dynamic Educational Portfolio

- A **distinct and evolving educational portfolio** of offerings **designed around contemporary**



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societal challenges and needs lies at the heart of our educational priorities. Rooted in top-quality, interdisciplinary research the initiatives within this portfolio will be developed collaboratively and designed to test, iterate and scale up innovative learning models.

- We will implement a range of formats including **joint programmes, joint/double degrees** and **shared modules and courses** as well as **micro-credentials**, which are available for learners at all academic and professional level.
- ENGAGE.EU's offerings are designed as flexible nodes within a shared European learning infrastructure that promotes innovative approaches to delivery, integration, and collaborative development. In principle, Our offerings carry **ECTS credits** and explicitly support physical and virtual **mobility**, enabling student engagement with diversity, complexity and societal challenges across Europe.

Empowering Students and Staff

- Faculty engagement is created by challenging and supporting academics at all levels to contribute to **educational innovation** and **interdisciplinary collaboration**. We stimulate mutual learning and exchange of good practises. All academics can gain experience in course design and are encouraged to shape the Alliance's core educational offerings and provide mentorship and critical oversight to ensure the transfer of teaching excellence. This network of educators forms the backbone of a **dynamic and connected academic learning space** oriented towards shared societal missions. ENGAGE.EU will cultivate a living culture of educational

innovation in which both learners and faculty play active roles. Learners are not mere recipients but **co-creators** of knowledge, engaging in collaborative problem-solving across borders and disciplines. Participation in ENGAGE.EU activities will strengthen their academic profiles and their capacity for societal engagement and action.

- Professional staff play an important role in ENGAGE.EU by developing their multicultural collaboration skills through exchanges, mobility programmes and shared best practices while ensuring the smooth operation and high quality of joint educational initiatives across the Alliance.

Connecting Curricula Across Europe

- ENGAGE.EU is committed to ensuring a **seamless educational experience** within our Alliance. We commit to identifying and **reducing administrative barriers** that hinder student mobility, curricular alignment and teaching innovation. When **developing or revising curricula**, member institutions will seek to integrate existing ENGAGE.EU offerings and/or consider how new educational initiatives could **contribute** to the ENGAGE.EU portfolio. Through this approach, the Alliance is building a shared commitment to educational transformation, as well as shared offerings.

2.2. Research as a Driver of Societal Transformation

Research plays a central role in ENGAGE.EU's ambition to contribute to a more cohesive and resilient European society. As a driver of societal transformation, research enables us to reframe pressing challenges, uncover new perspectives and



develop actionable solutions through academic inquiry.

ENGAGE.EU builds a **research ecosystem that is both excellent and engaged** - connecting disciplines, institutions and societal actors across Europe and, potentially, beyond. Through collaboration and a shared infrastructure, we enhance our collective capacity to address complex societal issues.

By working together, researchers and societal partners across the Alliance create impact that no single partner would be able to achieve alone. This joint approach strengthens connections with stakeholders, improves access to competitive funding and embeds societal relevance at the heart of our academic mission.

To move from ambition to impact, we have set ourselves the following goals:

Building Interdisciplinary Research Networks

- ENGAGE.EU will establish interdisciplinary, theme-based research networks that tackle key societal challenges. To stimulate these networks, we will connect researchers through targeted calls, thematic matchmaking and seed funding.
- At the same time, smaller teams of researchers across institutions will be encouraged to pursue bottom-up initiatives, ensuring that curiosity-driven research and emerging ideas continue to thrive. Recognizing the complementary roles of networks and teams, this dual approach - structured and open - ensures agility, creativity and strategic coherence.

Engaging Societal Partners in Research and Innovation

- To increase **relevance** and **impact**, researchers across the Alliance collaborate with a wide range of societal actors - such as companies, NGOs, municipalities and citizens - in a diverse and interconnected **research and innovation ecosystem**. To support this, ENGAGE.EU develops **mechanisms to connect** researchers with external partners through events and exchange opportunities, exploring **funding opportunities**.
- Our collaborations with societal partners are a **two-way engagement**. We actively invite stakeholders to co-shape research agendas, considering them to be essential contributors to long-term research outcomes. However, our research does more than simply reflect societal concerns; it is also a key driver that reframes problems, reveals systemic interdependencies, and opens new pathways for collective action.

Empowering Early-Stage Researchers

- We support the next generation of researchers by offering early-stage researchers a unique developmental environment across institutions, **including but not limited to a collaborative platform for research support**, shared supervision, and structured training in stakeholder engagement and research impact. This prepares them for attractive and sustainable careers while upholding the highest standards of **ethics, data management, and open and citizen science**, ensuring they are equipped to meet both academic and societal demands.
- ENGAGE.EU empowers PhD researchers by further developing our **joint doctoral**



education. This Lighthouse programme will offer interdisciplinary collaboration, access to transnational research communities and structured engagement with societal partners - enabling PhD researchers to contribute to European challenges and grow as engaged scholars.

2.3. Societal Engagement as a Bridge Between Knowledge and Action

The ENGAGE.EU Alliance - through its societal engagement activities - generates knowledge and actively applies it by working with businesses, policy makers and communities to generate impact. Our approach to societal engagement embodies the European values of democratic participation, social responsibility, and collaborative problem-solving.

Societal engagement empowers education and research, aligning our efforts with the needs and perspectives of our stakeholders. Therefore, building on existing initiatives such as our Lighthouse ENGAGE.EU Labs, ENGAGE.EU will cultivate a **conceptual space for transdisciplinary societal engagement** and actively drive collaboration to transform European society in inclusive and responsive ways.

ENGAGE.EU aims to further integrate societal engagement across its activities - moving from fragmented initiatives to a mature and strategic approach that enhances impact, visibility and trust. This strengthens not only our societal role in Europe but also our internal capabilities for relevance and renewal.

To achieve this, we have defined the following objectives:

Accelerating Societal Engagement for Greater Impact

- By 2035, we will significantly enhance and deepen our societal engagement by proactively seeking **deeper and long-term collaborations** with our stakeholders. Our goal is to better align academic work with societal needs, amplify our collective impact, and foster partnerships that actively support European democratic institutions and social cohesion.
- ENGAGE.EU aims to explore the **support structures** that can enable these partnerships, such as toolkits, funding mechanisms and designated responsibilities. We will monitor the impact of these collaborations not only in academic terms but also in terms of the societal outcomes they help deliver.

Positioning ENGAGE.EU as a Trusted Knowledge Partner

- We position ENGAGE.EU as a visible and trusted actor in the European knowledge ecosystem. Our partnerships with societal partners, other European Universities alliances, and international global actors are driven by **shared strategic priorities**.
- Our partnerships are guided by an assessment framework. Quality and impact, rather than quantity, will serve as guiding principles in the definition and management of partnerships. This reinforces ENGAGE.EU as a **label of excellence** in societal engagement and European citizenship development.



2.4. A Collaborative and Resilient Alliance Architecture

To realise our ambitions in education, research and societal engagement, ENGAGE.EU must operate as one integrated yet diverse Alliance. This requires not only aligning institutional strategies but also implementing a strategic architecture – a deliberately designed system of governance, collaboration and support that empowers people at all levels and across institutions, aligns regional action with shared goals and ensures long-term resilience. This entails an architecture that connects the three areas of engagement, reduces fragmentation and supports collective decision-making. This includes building joint capacity in the form of shared services, co-funded structures and legal frameworks that ensure continuity and responsiveness.

Together, these elements serve as an important pillar of our Alliance as a **place for experimentation, integration and systemic change** that supports innovation, peer learning and professional development across academic and administrative roles within the Alliance.

To realise this, we have set the following goals:

Strategic and Participatory Governance

- ENGAGE.EU will further refine its governance model to ensure it is fit for purpose following the transition from project phase to ENGAGE.EU's institutionalised status, thereby guaranteeing that all actors - learners, researchers, staff and societal partners - can contribute to shared priorities in a meaningful way. We aim to achieve a sensible balance between shared capacity and embeddedness in institutional operations. Rather than centralisation, we aim for distributed leadership with decision-making that is

both effective and grounded in institutional realities. This model will be designed to enable both top-down coordination and bottom-up initiatives across education, research and societal engagement, creating a decision-making culture that is inclusive, transparent and responsive to change. In this way, we ensure the model will last and will be beneficial to the alliance in the long term.

Shared Capacity for Impact

- As ENGAGE.EU activities become more integrated into institutional operations, we aim to explore how to transition from a project-based approach to a more collaborative operational ecosystem. This process will involve examining the potential for optimizing governance structures, exploring investments in shared capacity, and assessing the possibility of adopting a flexible legal and financial framework to support the Alliance's long-term functioning. The focus throughout will be on adaptability, sustainability, and responsiveness to emerging needs.



3. Conclusion

By 2035, ENGAGE.EU will be a leading European Universities alliance actively contributing to societal transformations. This Strategy translates our shared values and institutional strengths into a common agenda for education, research and societal engagement. We connect regional roots with European reach and academic excellence with societal relevance. What unites us is the belief that European universities are not only generators of knowledge but key actors in shaping a prosperous, sustainable and democratic Europe.

To implement this Strategy successfully, it must be embedded in the core missions of all member universities. This requires more than coordination; it calls for deliberate integration into institutional planning, funding, and governance structures. The Alliance will need to align strategic priorities, invest in shared capacity and create mechanisms that allow both structured collaboration and local flexibility. By doing so, ENGAGE.EU can deliver on its societal ambitions, respond effectively to emerging European challenges, and evolve into a lasting platform for transformation within the European higher education landscape.



Appendix – SWOT-analysis ENGAGE.EU

I. Strategic Challenges and Opportunities for ENGAGE.EU

As the ENGAGE.EU Alliance looks to the future, we find ourselves navigating a rapidly evolving landscape defined by technological innovation, shifting global economic and societal dynamics, and increasing competition among higher education institutions. To respond effectively, ENGAGE.EU must develop a clear understanding of the key forces shaping this environment and translate that insight into strategic action.

In this section, we examine the most pressing challenges and most promising future opportunities and how we can mobilise our collective strengths while addressing key internal barriers in order to remain competitive and relevant in an ever-changing world.

External Challenges

Our Alliance operates in a complex and evolving environment characterised by geopolitical instabilities, economic pressures and societal change. Persistent productivity gaps, high energy costs and complex regulations threaten Europe's competitiveness while rapid technological and environmental transitions put pressure on social cohesion and democratic resilience. Protectionist policies are increasingly undermining the openness of academic collaborations by limiting the free movement of people, ideas and research. Meanwhile, shifts in global power challenge Europe's ability to uphold its values and maintain its distinctive role in the world. These developments pose direct risks to the Alliance's mission and collaborative potential,

requiring resilience, adaptability and a continued commitment to cross-border engagement.

External Opportunities

Amidst these external challenges, powerful opportunities are emerging for ENGAGE.EU to act as a driver of Europe's transformations. The Alliance will not only align with these trends, but actively shape them through research, education, and policy engagement.

- 1) Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Technological Innovation:** As the European Union (EU) accelerates its AI initiatives to boost economic growth and competitiveness, the need for governance that ensures transparency, ethics and public trust is growing. ENGAGE.EU will lead in shaping these frameworks by conducting human-centred research, educating the next generation of ethical AI professionals, and establishing cross-sector partnerships that transform innovation into societal value.
- 2) Decarbonisation and the Green Transition:** Decarbonisation is central to the EU's economic and sustainability agenda. ENGAGE.EU will drive the human and societal aspects of this transition by building climate literacy, developing policy solutions for just and inclusive adaptation, and supporting the responsible adoption of clean technologies through interdisciplinary research and societal engagement.
- 3) Defence and Security:** The EU's unprecedented investment in defence will reshape policy and research priorities across Europe. While ENGAGE.EU does not engage in defence technology or operational security studies, it contributes to Europe's strategic autonomy through research on democratic resilience, economic stability and governance



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innovation, ensuring that security policies reinforce, rather than compromise, fundamental European values.

Internal Strengths

ENGAGE.EU possesses unique internal strengths, which position us for continued success.

- 1) **Committed Leadership and Collaborative Culture:** Stakeholders highlight a high degree of alignment, mutual engagement and a constructive culture across member institutions. While our differences in expertise and perspective are a source of strength, we share a common commitment to ENGAGE.EU's mission and strategic priorities, enabling effective joint action. This cohesion is further reinforced by renewed confidence from the European Commission - both a recognition of past success and a strategic asset for future growth.
- 2) **Proven Capacity for Joint Implementation:** ENGAGE.EU has built a solid track record of delivering shared outputs across education, research and societal engagement - the universities' three core missions, which we see as intrinsically interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Our demonstrated ability to move from planning to coordinated execution across partners reinforces credibility and provides a robust foundation for the expansion of our ambitions towards 2035.
- 3) **Structured Engagement with Stakeholders:** The Alliance's stable, structured relationships with external actors – including businesses, industry, civil society and public institutions – are a key differentiator. These partnerships increase our societal relevance and impact, while improving the quality and applicability of our work through feedback loops.

- 4) **Capacity for Skills Development and Lifelong Learning:** Building on our educational expertise and digital infrastructure, ENGAGE.EU is well-positioned to support Europe's upskilling and reskilling agenda. We strengthen the skills base of students, professionals, and society at large through flexible learning pathways, micro-credentials, and cross-border mobility opportunities.

Internal Challenges for the Future

As with any evolving collaboration, ENGAGE.EU must address internal areas of friction or fragmentation that could affect our coherence and impact.

- 1) **Dare to Do Less:** Stakeholders emphasize the need to focus on a limited number of high-impact, high-value core initiatives. By prioritizing projects reflecting the Alliance's strategic priorities, ENGAGE.EU has the capacity to allocate resources, deepen collaboration, and deliver meaningful responses to urgent societal challenges while still allowing subsets of actors to engage in additional complementary actions.
- 2) **Integral Value of ENGAGE.EU:** A key internal concern is that ENGAGE.EU is often seen as separate from the universities' regular activities rather than an integral part of their core missions. This makes it difficult for the Alliance to establish a firm foundation and truly excel by involving larger numbers of learners or staff. To address this, ENGAGE.EU must weave its goals into the fabric of each participating institution.
- 3) **Complex Governance:** Stakeholders highlight that complex governance slows down decision-making and responsiveness. To enhance agility, ENGAGE.EU must



streamline structures, clarify roles and improve coordination - enabling faster, more effective collaborations with internal and external partners.

- 4) Sustainable Funding:** Long-term funding remains a major challenge. As reliance on EU support may not be guaranteed, ENGAGE.EU must diversify its funding to secure a resilient financial base.

A strong coherence with the institutional strategies of our member universities is equally crucial for commitment and long-term integration. This requires addressing governance complexities, aligning resources with evolving research priorities, strengthening education to ensure its relevance and impact, and embedding ENGAGE.EU more deeply into the core activities of each partner institution.

II. What Does This Mean for ENGAGE.EU?

ENGAGE.EU is at a critical turning point. Having established a strong foundation through focused collaborations and shared structures, the Alliance now faces the task of shaping a coherent long-term strategy. ENGAGE.EU must sharpen its articulation of what we mean by engaged citizenship and societal engagement as these are not abstract ambitions; they relate directly to Europe's social fabric and to the values that underpin the European project.

The external challenges and opportunities outlined above not only affect academic research and teaching but also the social, political and economic fabric of Europe. In this context of uncertainty and change, universities are expected to be more agile, collaborative and socially engaged than ever before. These challenges also open new possibilities for innovative research, stronger (technological) partnerships and enriched learning experiences.

Therefore, ENGAGE.EU aligns its strategic agenda with the emerging societal challenges while safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Promoting and facilitating transnational collaboration to enable our universities to pool expertise and combine complementary strengths. Herewith we enhance our societal relevance, strategic influence and institutional resilience.





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Contact:
Coordinator University of Mannheim
Prof. Dr. Moritz Fleischmann
engage@uni-mannheim.de