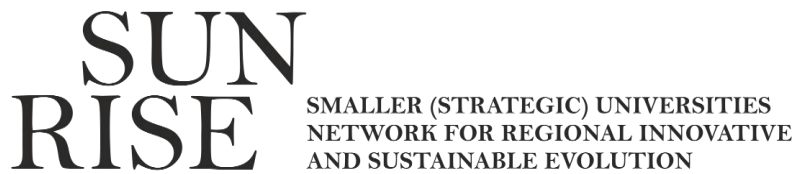


## Mission Statement of the University Rectors / Presidents



### What would happen in the many European regions, if small universities were to disappear?

- Brain drain would have a drastic impact on the competitiveness, resilience and sustainability of these regions;
- Jobs and (tech-based) companies would disappear or would not have the opportunity to develop;
- The numerous existing networks with various regional stakeholders, including with municipalities, schools and industry partners, would deteriorate or erode;
- Demographic change, an ageing population and cultural deprivation would follow;
- Democracy would ultimately be at stake due to increased ideological detachment of our regions.

### Imagine if...

... there was a dynamic network of agile, efficient smaller-sized universities across different European regions that serve as game-changers and role models for their staff and students, the surrounding communities and the development of innovative ecosystems. Based on this bold vision, the Smaller Universities Network for Regional Innovative and Sustainable Evolution (SUNRISE) sets out to promote impactful changes in rural, remote, maritime... areas:

- To motivate and equip university staff to act as ambassadors for knowledge development with institutional and associated partners and by actively including students;
- To facilitate the new generations of students to become committed, responsible, and responsive professionals and citizens. Students, professionals and citizens are conscious of the positive or negative impact of their decisions and actions. We aim to educate future problem-solvers dedicated to promoting human welfare;
- To enable the universities of the SUNRISE network to connect, through approaches to complementarity and by developing new interdisciplinary links;
- To empower communities within the regional innovation ecosystems where these universities are immersed, embedding European values with democracy at the core of all actions;
- Establish connections with other EU and non-EU regions, bringing the world to our regions;
- To provide effective regional solutions to boost the Triple Transition for greener, more digital and social living.

The SUNRISE alliance will enhance and provide focus to the mission of our universities, boosting our rankings and our reputations, thus attracting more students. The alliance aims to revitalise and contribute to local economies, by embracing a European perspective and by fostering (further) sustainable/circular practices: Thinking globally and acting locally.

## Motivation: The importance of regional / rural areas and the role of universities

We represent an alliance of **young, dynamic and locally-rooted small universities**. Our objective is to strengthen the role of such universities as poles of innovation for the **development of industry and society** beyond metropolitan areas, linking the **local with national, European and international levels**.

Regional and rural areas encompass approximately 80% of the European landscape, yet they are home to only 30% of the European population. Multiple sectors of life are directly or indirectly depending on these areas, such as for agricultural products, construction materials, and freshwater. Regional and rural areas play a **pivotal role** in the prosperity and welfare of society due to their economic, environmental and social contributions. A vast number of European universities are smaller sized (2,182 of 2,805 have less than 10,000 students - according to the ETER database<sup>1</sup>). The majority of those are located in non-metropolitan areas.

***Smaller sized, rurally-located universities*** form a vital part of the European university landscape. **However, smaller universities are currently under-represented** in European University Alliances.

Our university alliance has great **potential to make significant contributions to addressing modern-day challenges in both Europe and the world**:

- Small universities, deeply connected to their respective regions, possess a thorough understanding of local specificities. . They play a pivotal role in enhancing the attractiveness of rural areas, often by elevating the quality and diversity of regional offerings (e.g. in terms of sustainability practices and an increased prosperity of these regions). This aligns with a key challenge that these universities face: How to increase their attractiveness by transforming brain drain into brain circulation in accordance with the objectives of the European Innovation Agenda<sup>2</sup>;
- Rural landscapes and communities serve as crucial benchmarks for quality of life and as indicators of climate change. They not only offer opportunities for leisure activities, but also foster a sense of belonging, appreciation for the environment, and provide chances for relaxation and personal growth; and
- Rural areas are heavily dependent on small and medium-sized entities (enterprises, universities, museums, etc.) for their well-being and medium-to-long-term socio-economic development. These ***small, rurally-located universities act as connectors or bridges*** to:
  1. Large metropolitan areas with substantial corporations and universities;
  2. Regional and rural areas with predominantly small and medium-sized companies. ***Small rurally-located universities*** are natural **partners for SMEs**; and
  3. International scientific networks that explore and contribute to the local areas' **specific needs**.

Universities in regional and rural areas also play a vital role in addressing **inclusion and diversity** issues. They provide young talents with the opportunity to study close to their hometowns, eliminating the

<sup>1</sup> European Tertiary Education Register - ETER <https://www.eter-project.com/>, download date: 15.12.2023

<sup>2</sup> 'Brain circulation' needs to be addressed not only at national but also at European level through policy measures and instruments.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733655/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733655\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733655/EPRS_BRI(2022)733655_EN.pdf), accessed Nov 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

need to relocate to remote and often costly metropolitan areas that may not be financially accessible for everyone.

The SUNRISE alliance embodies the rich diversity present in European regional areas.

## Challenges of small and young universities in regional and rural areas

Small and young universities in regional and rural areas face several challenges in fulfilling their mission and meeting the expectations set by industry and society:

1. **Students often opt to relocate to larger cities, causing a significant brain drain** towards urban centres, both at the commencement of their bachelor's studies and when pursuing specialisation at the master's level or post-graduation.
2. Despite sharing comparable performance expectations, such as excellence in teaching and research and compliance with national and EU regulations, these universities grapple with resource constraints stemming from limited **financial and infrastructural resources available to larger institutions**.
3. Faced with **limited resources**, these universities must strategically focus their efforts on specific higher education (HE) activities, resulting in a reduced emphasis on research. Financial constraints further impede their ability to invest in state-of-the-art laboratory equipment across various disciplines.
4. Smaller institutions **encounter challenges in securing funds** for both research and teaching endeavours. They sometimes have a lack of critical mass and essential expertise available in one single smaller university, which often hinders success in competitive grant applications and constrain their financial capacity.
5. Regional and rural areas display **lower levels of internationalisation** in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts. This leads to increased language and cultural challenges for students and employees, especially those from non-EU countries, adding complexity to the educational experience.

## Strengths of small and young universities in regional and rural areas

Despite the aforementioned challenges, smaller and young universities in regional and rural areas possess numerous strengths that must be fully explored and leveraged to benefit the European Union and to promote its development. These strengths include:

1. The universities are **deeply rooted in their respective regions**, enabling them to comprehend local needs – a significant advantage for contributing to regional development. Each region possesses unique characteristics, and fostering regional development demands not only fundamental technical solutions but also a profound understanding of specific area traits. Tailored solutions, along with community support, are essential for effective regional development.
2. The universities play a key role in **educating regional leaders** capable of contributing to the formulation and execution of regional innovation strategies. This involves not only exposing students to cutting-edge knowledge and skills but also building, strengthening and championing regional competitive advantages within an interconnected network involving education, businesses and administration. Such initiatives are intended to act as a deterrent to the brain drain from the regions.

3. The universities **naturally align as partners for small and medium-sized companies**, constituting around 90% of all businesses in Europe and, consequently, playing a substantial role in enhancing societal prosperity.
4. The universities are uniquely positioned to serve **as sources and catalysts** of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship for locally and regionally based SMEs.
5. With an **excellent student-professor ratio** and streamlined administrative processes, student supervision at these universities is more immediate and personalised. Additionally, access to research labs and other university resources is more convenient.
6. **Surrounded by nature**, the universities can reconnect their communities with the environment through a variety of academic, research, sports, and cultural activities. Their proximity to nature positions these universities effectively to address **contemporary challenges related to climate change and sustainability**. Through educational programs, research initiatives, technology transfer, and engagement activities, they can contribute significantly to developing solutions and raising awareness about environmental issues.
7. The universities are highly **flexible and agile**, enabling swift responses to changes due to shorter decision-making processes. This flexibility, coupled with streamlined administration, enhances the potential for innovation in teaching, research, and collaborations. It facilitates the development of customised academic curricula and the prompt implementation of new EU policies and regulations in education, research, and third mission activities.
8. The small size of these institutions and their surroundings allow them to provide short commutes between home, work, childcare, and schools, as well as lower living costs. This makes universities in rural areas appealing for individuals and families seeking a fair and healthy work-life balance.

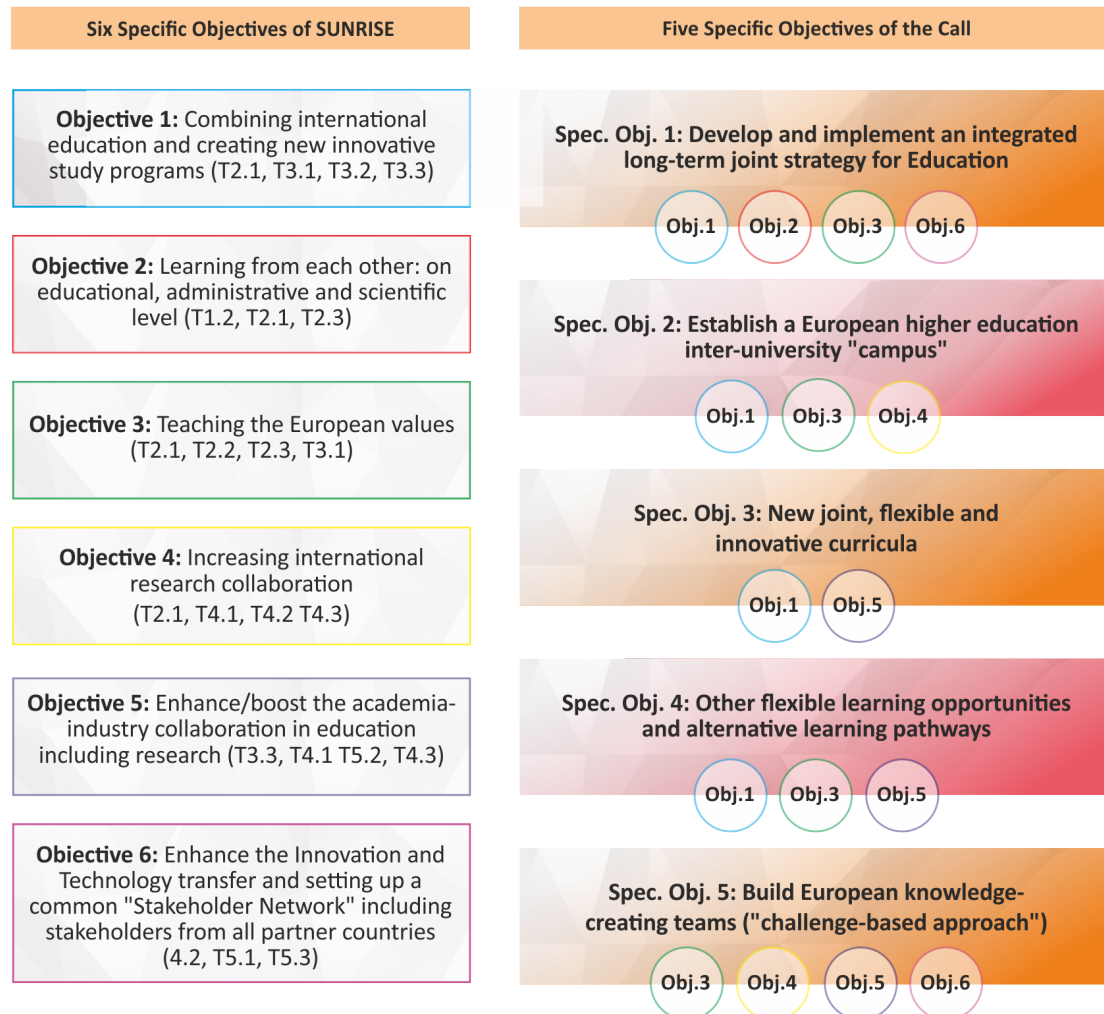
## What are the objectives, actions and measures of SUNRISE?

Small and young universities in regional and rural areas encounter challenges when striving to maximise their potential individually. However, through the establishment of an alliance, the universities consolidate resources to amplify the strengths of these institutions, promoting mutual complementarity and safeguarding regional diversity. By capitalising on the inherent flexibility and close relationships with local SMEs, the alliance aims to serve as a model, accelerating innovation in regional and rural contexts, tackling sustainability challenges, and contributing to societal prosperity at the local, national, and European levels.

The collaborative approach of the smaller institutions in the alliance facilitates rapid and cooperative actions. Resource constraints require regional universities to customise offerings according to local needs. Through the alliance, we share expertise, infrastructures and establish mobility corridors, enriching and complementing each partner's diversity. This results in a European University Alliance with a compelling, high-quality didactic portfolio and strategic internationalisation, embedded in a network that mirrors Europe's rich cultural heritage.

Shared values and governance principles streamline collaboration within the alliance, enabling innovative strategies. The alliance serves as a model for smaller universities, showcasing how collective efforts and complementarity can empower these institutions to fulfil their mission. Acting as catalysts for innovation in regional and rural development, they significantly contribute to Europe's Triple Transition.

More specifically, the alliance has the following main objectives:



### Objective 1: Fostering international education and creating new and innovative study programmes

Our principal goal is to enable an international and culturally rich educational environment by introducing innovative study programmes through diverse collaborations. Joint BSc/MSc/PhD study programmes, complementing the existing curriculum and allowing students to enrol in programmes and modules offered by partner universities. Shared course content across the alliance will not only optimise the use of resources but also improve programme alignment and facilitate student mobility. Initiatives such as the SUSEE (ERASMUS KA220, Smaller Universities for Sustainability in Engineering Education) project will pave the way for the development of sustainability-focused content shared among partner universities.

To cater to a broader age spectrum beyond the traditional 18-23 range and to enhance flexibility, the universities in the alliance will craft teaching models that integrate in-person and online methods. These models will encompass theoretical and gamified teaching, as well as practical and project-based learning, alongside traditional evaluation and challenge-based learning. Inclusivity will be strengthened by attracting diverse applicants, offering a varied academic curriculum with flexible schedules, modular content, and various learning methods. Additionally, industrial partners will be engaged in academic programme development, aligning education with real regional workforce needs. Cost-effective teaching models will be prioritised, leveraging shared experiences, modules, and virtual labs to extend the didactic offer in an affordable manner.

## **Objective 2: Shaping the cornerstones of our University Alliance: learning from each other in education, science and administration**

The alliance aims to establish an inclusive, digitised, and international work environment operating as an integrated community. The universities will facilitate language and cultural learning to effectively integrate international students into regional and rural areas. This will be achieved by recognising the significance of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Models will be devised to teach local languages to exchange students, thereby enhancing graduates' chances for employability in regional SMEs. For graduates from non-EU countries, cultural integration will be addressed through partnerships with multilingual universities within the alliance via enhanced language education offers. Collaborations with industry partners will further promote the region's work culture, contributing to increased regional internationalisation.

## **Objective 3: Promoting European values**

The objective is to further integrate European values into the educational frameworks and into university-society related actions in regional and rural areas, recognising their significance in sustaining democracy. This initiative aims to cultivate a sense of shared values, promoting unity and cultural understanding among students and graduates. The alliance aspires to contribute to the broader goal of fostering a cohesive European identity by incorporating European values, including human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights, into administrative procedures, the curriculum, and research and innovation projects.

In a broader context, Europe's identity and values are often associated with an "urban lifestyle" and – mobility, which is sometimes misunderstood as having little relevance to the everyday lives of people in non-metropolitan regions. Within these regions and rural areas, there can be a prevalent scepticism and, increasingly, open rejection of the European Union. Therefore, we believe that the European Union should be more visible and present, even in non-metropolitan regions. Our universities have already taken ample steps in this direction, and we feel a responsibility to intensify our role as ambassadors and agents for the development of European identity. This involves providing opportunities for people in these regions to (re-)embrace and contribute to shaping Europe and its values. By making Europe more relatable to their own experiences, we aim to address and counter the growing (political) disaffection in these communities.

## **Objective 4: Increasing international research collaboration**

Building upon existing research collaborations, the alliance aims to broaden and strengthen international research collaboration, fostering the exchange of ideas and expertise while leveraging complementarities across partner universities. With a collective focus on research in the area of digital technologies – from device technology design to software development – most universities in the alliance host robust technological and interdisciplinary research centres, providing a solid foundation for further research activities. The plan includes linking research support structures to formulate common application strategies and facilitate joint research programmes and projects, including those aligned with HORIZON and other initiatives. Initiatives will be also developed to encourage collaborative publications and shared infrastructural resources, fostering a vibrant research ecosystem within the alliance.

## **Objective 5: Strengthening academia-industry collaboration through all university missions**

This objective centres on fostering academia-industry collaboration, aiming to develop models for symbiotic relationships between each partner university and the enterprises in their respective regions. New approaches will be developed to incentivize SMEs to invest in research and innovation,

ensuring the retention of young talents within the region. Decision-aid models will be crafted to guide SMEs through the Triple Transitions, addressing knowledge gaps and methods required for sustainable and digital transformations. Additionally, joint educational programmes and modules, including new models for lifelong learning, will be developed in collaboration with businesses and societal needs. These initiatives aim to enhance regional innovation capacity and address specific regional needs effectively.

### **Objective 6: Strengthening innovation and technology transfer, and establishing a common "stakeholder network"**

The alliance is committed to enhancing innovation and technology transfer by establishing a common "Stakeholder Network." This network will bring together stakeholders from all partner countries, facilitating collaboration and knowledge exchange. By connecting academia, industry, and other stakeholders, the network aims to accelerate innovation, promote sustainable development, and contribute to broader societal prosperity at the local, national, and European levels.

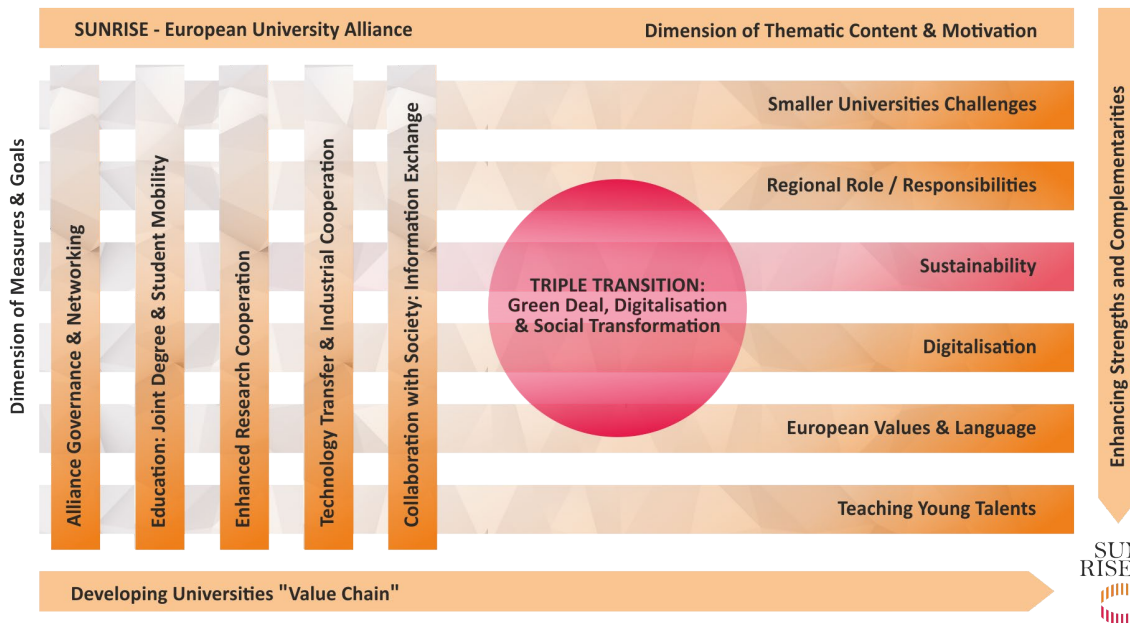
### **How does the alliance contribute to the European University Initiative?**

The alliance contributes to the European University Initiative by aligning its mission with the overarching goal of developing a holistic and human-centred learning approach, promoting creativity and innovation in rural and remote territories. Prioritising inclusion, lifelong learning, sustainable development, critical thinking, real-world problem solving, intercultural and global awareness, digitalization, communication, and collaboration, the alliance seeks to tackle important challenges of today and tomorrow. It further emphasises the importance of being connected to the real world to provide solutions for its challenges, combining creativity and analytical thinking to find innovative solutions. Collaborating with international and regional socio-economic partners is imperative for the benefit of mutual institutional learning and advances. It is also imperative for preparing a future workforce and supporting them in the multiple transition processes ongoing in European societies.

To achieve these contributions, the alliance

- (1) outlines a comprehensive strategy for the design and implementation of joint, customisable European academic programs accessible to all interested target groups (students, lifelong learners, staff members, and stakeholders).
- (2) promotes an innovation culture across all SUNRISE activities, including creative approaches to academics, research, technological transfer, and administration.
- (3) collaborates via an agreed organisational structure that includes all stakeholders.

The following figure illustrates the six main objectives of the alliance and how these address the five overarching specific objectives of the call:



## Long Term vision

With the SUNRISE Alliance initiative we want not only to support change but to trigger it. We want to be a catalyst for innovation in research-based education. We want to redefine and to sharpen our role in transfer of technology not only to support industries and stakeholders in their current needs but anticipate their future ones. We want to play a real role in reducing inequalities by being an actor for attracting diverse populations to knowledge and learning.

We want to combine our forces with other smaller universities and want to connect us with other European University Alliances to create a 'network of the networks'.

By the end of the project, the alliance envisions not only achieving the stated six SUNRISE objectives but also transcending academic and administrative boundaries to foster a profound sense of community. The universities will have delivered a role model which works. SUNRISE Alliance will have evolved into more than just a collaboration. The SUNRISE Alliance members will have successfully adapted and transformed their institutions and brought them to the next level. The SUNRISE Alliance structures will be fully developed and implemented and will be ready for the post-funding period to come.

The post-funding phase requires the continuation of the implemented SUNRISE tools such as:

- a sustainable communication platform for teachers, students and researchers to initiate new collaborative projects and exchange of experience;
- regular channels of inter-institutional consultations to better respond to common challenges faced by our universities on the higher education market;
- a common brand for our joint study programmes and initiatives (existing and further new ones);
- a governance and legal structure that works also beyond the funding period, e.g. as a European Grouping of territorial Cooperation (EGTC).

Furthermore we would need:

- Strategies for the further financing of SUNRISE Alliance
- a continued deep collaboration with a network of both regional and national stakeholders;
- A close collaboration with the regional authorities to sustain and to further develop the legal framework of our Alliance.

Summarised, we aspire to be a catalyst for innovation and research-based education in our regions and beyond and together and through our Alliance, we will increase our impact.

<b>Ilmenau University of Technology</b>	TUIL		Ilmenau, 22.01.2024	 Prof. Kai-Uwe Sattler President
<b>Free University of Bozen-Bolzano</b>	unibz		Bolzano, 23.01.2024	 Prof. Paolo Lugli Rector
<b>University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów</b>	UITM		Rzeszów, 25.01.2024	 Prof. Andrzej Rozmus, Rector
<b>Université de Technologie de Compiègne</b>	UTC		Compiègne, 22.01.2024	 Prof. Claire Rossi President
<b>European University Cyprus</b>	EUC		Nikosia, 25.01.2024	 Prof. Andreas Efstathiou, Rector
<b>Mälardalen University</b>	MDU		Västerås/ Eskilstuna, 23.01.2024	 Prof. Martin Hellström, Rector
<b>Università Politecnica delle Marche</b>	UNIVPM		Ancona, 25.01.2024	 Prof. Gian Luca Gregori, Rector
<b>"Džemal Bijedić" University of Mostar</b>	UNMO		Mostar, 25.01.2024	 Prof. Alena Huseinbegović, Rector
<b>Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo</b>	PUVV		Viana do Castelo, 22.01.2024	 Prof. Carlos Manuel da Silva Rodrigues; President