Mission Statement

January 2024

Our Vision: a European University designed to better serve society

Our vision

ATHENA University aims to define a common European approach to scientific, societal and technological development that helps foster a better future.

At ATHENA University, students and professors co-create value with our industrial and socio-economic partners by focusing on the societal and environmental challenges of our day. The arts, social sciences and the humanities interplay with the natural and engineering sciences to advance technological developments, and applied research is as likely to feed fundamental advances as vice-versa. Together, we are deeply embedded in our regions and communities and globally connected to the World. **We are proud to be the one of only four European Universities so far funded to have a majority of Widening country members**[1].

Our trajectory

Created in 2020, ATHENA has been shaped through bottom-up approaches in which student initiatives, input from research groups, departments, and our external stakeholders feed into a global ATHENA ecosystem. Over the past 3 years, by combining our strengths, we have gained critical mass and visibility; by building on our complementarities, we are shaping a common identity; by testing new, multidisciplinary approaches to technological and scientific challenges, we are providing impactful solutions to the needs of society.

Today we are moving to a new phase, focused on deeper institutional integration. We have reinforced our governance with weekly meetings of all Rectors, are aligning our strategies with a common ATHENA level strategy in Education, Research, Innovation and Societal Outreach, and have committed to integrate HR and Budgetary policy based on equal opportunities and ethical principles.
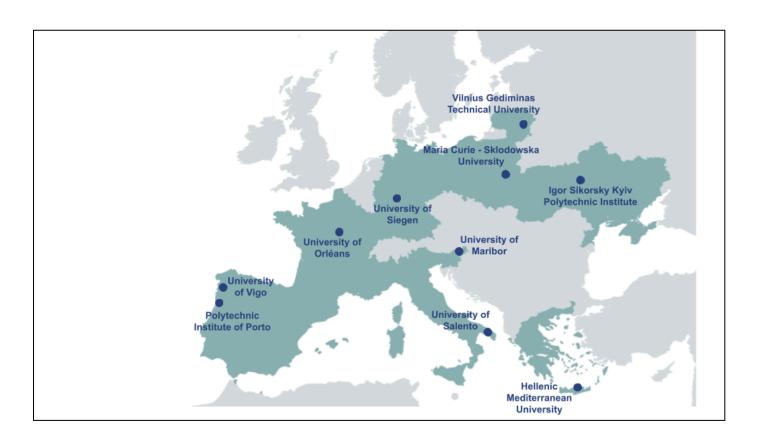
Our model

In the long-term, ATHENA University sees itself as a fully integrated university in which existing members will become regional campuses. Within this model, each regional campus will maintain existing structures. However, strategy will be defined at ATHENA level and most academic and administrative staff will be integrated into ATHENA-wide Hubs and Clusters. These will be interdisciplinary, challenge-based, co-designed with external stakeholders and pan-European in nature. They will increase our global visibility and our territorial impact. **These ATHENA University structures will play a comparable role to existing departments and faculties within the HR and Budgetary processes of each university to ensure long-term sustainability**.

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[1] 6 of the 10 member institutions of ATHENA are located in widening countries: Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Ukraine, according to the definition of the European Commission.

Our Identity and Values

Our profile

Our ten universities are comparatively young and deeply rooted in our regions. As such, they play a crucial role in retaining and attracting talent, driving innovation and training the next generation.

Our regions themselves share a comparable profile with a strong ecosystem of small and / medium enterprises, largely focused on secondary sector industries (metal processing, chemical production, automotive, plastic, food, textile, to provide a few examples), and on the technologies and skills necessary to modernise them (such as Software engineering, advanced ICT, big data techniques, etc), in line with the Industry 4.0 transformation. This brings opportunities with the strong re-industrialisation focus of the European Union, and also challenges, notably in terms of digitalisation and sustainability.

ATHENA's members	
Hellenic Mediterranean University (GR)	Founded in 1983, 21500 students, 1700 academic staff, campuses in 5 cities, comprehensive university with focus on applied fields
Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute (UA)	Founded in 1898, 24500 students, 2500 academic staff, university of technology
Maria Curie - Skłodowska University (PL)	Founded in 1944, 16000 students, 1500 academic staff, campuses in 2 cities, comprehensive university
Polytechnic Institute of Porto (PT)	Founded in 1985, 21000 students, 1810 academic staff, campuses in 5 cities, university of applied sciences
University of Maribor (SI)	Founded in 1975, 14500 students, 1200 academic staff, campuses in 8 cities, comprehensive university (with medicine and engineering)
University of Orléans (FR)	Refounded in 1966, 19000 students, 1200 academic staff, campuses in 6 cities, comprehensive university (with medicine and engineering)
University of Salento (IT)	Founded in 1955, 19600 students, 650 academic staff, campuses in 2 cities, comprehensive university (with medicine and engineering)
University of Siegen (DE)	Founded in 1972, 15000 students, 1420 academic staff, comprehensive university (with engineering)
University of Vigo (ES)	Founded in 1990, 20000 students, 2100 academic staff, campuses in 3 cities, comprehensive university with focus on technology
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (LT)	Founded in 1956, 8100 students, 1000 academic staff, university of technology in a capital city

ATHENA
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

Our complementarities

Alongside these common features, we combine a wide range of geographical locations, a strong linguistic variety (11 languages), and different profiles. These complement each other and enable us to test and compare different institutional models.

University of Orléans and University of Siegen are close to large metropolitan areas (Paris and Rhein-Ruhr), whereas Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, the University of Salento and the University of Vigo are all situated on the borders of their countries. The Hellenic Mediterranean University faces the classical challenges of an insular environment, while the University of Maribor competes with the comparative attractiveness of neighbouring Styria, one of the richest regions in Europe. The Polytechnic Institute of Porto and Vilnius Gediminas Technical University have specific roles within their cities, where they complement the local comprehensive university with a greater focus on intermetropolitan development and technological fields. Finally, Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute has a systemic role in a country fighting for survival in the face of Russian aggression.

Some of our universities are located on a single campus or within a single city, whereas others are present in various smaller towns of our regions such as the Hellenic Mediterranean University, Maribor, Orléans, Salento, or Vigo.

Perhaps most importantly, we span the spectrum from comprehensive universities such as Maribor, Orléans, Salento or Siegen, to partly comprehensive universities such as Lublin (without medicine, life sciences or engineering) or Hellenic Mediterranean (mostly applied fields), to those with a strong engineering focus such as Vigo, fully-fledged universities of technology like Vilnius and Kyiv, and universities of applied sciences, such as IP Porto.

These differences in profile reflect our commitment to combine the respective strengths of our institutional models to foster a more inclusive, innovative, societally-oriented approach to higher education and technology.

Our commitments

These common contextual factors explain our shared mission, and the strong identity of ATHENA, which is built on the complementarity of our members.

First, **we share a deep commitment to strengthening transnational cooperation, European values and identity**, where inclusion[2] takes centre stage. We are convinced that contemporary challenges can only be addressed by educating responsible and critical individuals capable of considering and integrating diverse disciplinary and cultural

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[2] ATHENA has developed several actions and initiatives in this respect. For example, ATHENA members developed a common research project on assistive technology for deaf students and staff, with translation into several European sign languages; through the ATHENA International Relations Office, our services cooperate to facilitate the integration of international students with disabilities (best practices); each year, common ATHENA actions are developed and put into place to favour gender equality in academia and gender-violence free environments.

perspectives. The diversity of our communities of students and researchers, complemented by our close relationships with partners from around the world, is a fundamental asset towards this mission.

Second, **as higher education institutions in non-metropolitan settings, we all share a strong sense of responsibility towards our regional ecosystems.** We recognise the pivotal role that we play, as major regional actors, to positively influence the local equilibrium through our actions. Such a contribution happens through multiple channels: upskilling and reskilling, development of research and innovation capacity, contribution to bringing science into the public sphere, alignment of our strategy with the Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies[3], etc. All these channels contribute notably to the transition of our regions towards smart and sustainable growth, through ATHENA's notable achievements in the areas of Sustainable Development Goals *Responsible consumption and production* (SDG12) and *Industry, innovation and infrastructure* (SDG9)[4].

Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute (KPI)

KPI is our only member situated in a major European capital. However, as Ukraine seeks to join the European Union, the role of KPI is closely aligned with that of our other members with a crucial role to play in terms of alignment, upskilling, brain circulation and innovation[5].

Third, **we share a strongly proactive stance towards students' success.**[6] This is crucial because it is through education that universities such as ours have the greatest impact on the development and innovation of our regions[7]. The human scale of our cities and institutions is key to providing tailored support to our students for their personal and professional growth, ensuring that their skills are aligned to the needs of the labour market as well as enabling them to become agents of change and entrepreneurs. In this context, our institutions act as a powerful attracting force bringing new international talents to our regions.

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[3] The University of Orléans and Vilnius Tech are cited in the case studies of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission for their contributions to Smart Specialisation Strategies of their regions. Similarly, the University of Vigo, the University of Salento and the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University set up research centres (Centre for Marine Research, Research Centre on Circular Economy, ECOTECH-COMPLEX centre, respectively) that are tightly aligned to the regional strategic priorities. The Digital Innovation Hub at the University of Maribor, funded under Digital Europe Programme European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH) Network, provides assistance to companies and public administration in addressing digital challenges.

[4] The specialisation index of ATHENA's publications for SDGs 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) is 1.8 and 1.81, respectively. The specialisation index is the comparison between the ratio of publications related to a given SDG with respect to the overall volume of publications of ATHENA, and the average across Europe (considered as EU27+UK) of the same ratio. A specialisation index greater than one indicates that ATHENA is more specialised than the European average for that given SDG.

[5] The choice of KPI to join ATHENA as a full member rather than alliance of western European research-intensive universities is based on the complementarity of our research and education portfolios and shared strategic priorities.

[6] ATHENA is also specialised on SDG4 (Quality education) with an index of 1.61.

[7] Bonaccorsi, A., Barin, L., Belingheri, P., Biagi, F. and Sanchez-Barrioluengo, M., 2023. Is higher education more important for firms than research? Disentangling university spillovers. The Journal of Technology Transfer, pp.1-26.

Our values

As members of ATHENA, we all share the same values that guide our activities.

Academic freedom, autonomy and accountability. Our institutions are committed to the academic freedom and autonomy necessary to produce and transmit knowledge. Being free to learn, investigate and create is what enables us to be a window onto the world, challenge the dominant visions, and work towards a fair and sustainable future. Only from an independent position can we build fresh perspectives, new solutions and pathways towards a more equitable, cohesive and competitive Europe. Only from an independent position can we be fully accountable for our actions.

Curiosity and creativity. Curiosity is our key driver. It motivates us to follow new leads which question our knowledge and our current way of thinking, thus opening new spaces for experimentation and innovation. The challenges brought by this constant forward movement require a creative mindset: the ability to adopt different perspectives, to recombine our knowledge and competencies to devise new solutions. Our education aims at fostering those two qualities in our students.

Ethics and integrity. The way we teach, conduct research, and collaborate with our stakeholders is always based on factual evidence and rational arguments. Only with such a firm ethical framework are we able to protect and promote the credibility of science as a source of truthful and reliable knowledge, against the threat of increasing disinformation in the public sphere. As guarantors of scientific expertise and sites for critical debate, our institutions strengthen democracy in Europe.

Commitment to our regions and to European cohesion. We are key actors in our regional contexts. We thus constantly strive to develop our activities by engaging the stakeholders (industries, regional governments, the third sector and civic society) to support their development and growth towards more sustainable models of production and living. We firmly believe that a cohesive Europe means that all regions and countries actively shape the vision and the development of our continent. We promote this belief by providing local solutions to European-wide challenges.

Diversity, Inclusiveness and Equity. Our institutions are committed to provide our students and staff with the best opportunities for their personal and professional development, ensuring that they all have access to quality education and mobility opportunities, independently of their socio-economic backgrounds and abilities. This is particularly important for our institutions that often welcome students with lower socio-economic status. It is also crucial at a European scale where fairness and justice require a differentiated approach. Our members have also developed ambitious gender equality plans and advocate equal opportunities for students and staff with all abilities. We value diversity of all kinds (cultural, social, cognitive, linguistic) and we are proud of our diverse communities of students, academic and non-academic personnel.

Our Mission and Strategic Goals

Our key challenges

As underlined above, the composition of our alliance and the complementarity of our campuses is aligned with our vision. This said, addressing the challenges caused by technological and scientific developments in widening countries and non-metropolitan regions is clearly an ambitious endeavour.

Indeed, at the global level, the growing technological gap with China and the US is seen as a critical risk to Europe's future[8], yet, simultaneously, technologically-induced polarisation is regularly cited as one of the major challenges of our time, since it feeds widening territorial and societal differences[9]. And whereas the post-1945 intuition was that scientific progress would translate into technological advances which would naturally play an equalising role, the past decades have shown multiple times that such convergence is far from automatic[10]. This is particularly true in territories and countries like ours that face brain drain and demographic decline.

In this context, our pride at being one of the only four European Universities with a majority of Widening country members is tempered by the knowledge that scientific and technological developments often actually lead to divergence, an increase in inequality between regions, brain drain and growing difficulty in attracting international talent.

The Innovation Scorecards[11] provide a perfect illustration of the challenge ahead. **According to the European Innovation Scoreboard, eight of the ten countries are below the European average in terms of Innovation**. Even more worryingly, whereas the overall score of the majority of European regions has progressed between 2020 and 2023, various of our regions have regressed. **According to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard, in 2020 4 out of our 9 regions had a score of over 100, yet, by 2023, only 2 out of 9 had a score over 100**. The performance of the only country whose regions are not measured by the Regional Innovation Scoreboard, Ukraine, has itself worsened in the past few years.

These numbers reinforce our conviction that we need to work together as a single university to bridge the gaps in performance between our regions and Europe.

Our approach

The two major challenges outlined above, namely increasing technological competition and addressing growing inter-European gaps, require a change in approach, which ATHENA

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[8] Amongst an abundant literature, see for instance Euro Area Competitiveness: State of Play, Challenges and Trade-offs for Policy, prepared by the European Commission for the Eurogroup (meetings of the finance ministers of the eurozone).

[9] See for instance the reflections of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the Council of Europe, in November 2022.

[10] See for instance: Kijek, T., Kijek, A. and Matras-Bolibok, A., 2023. Innovation and Regional Technological Convergence: Theory and Evidence. Springer Nature.

[11] https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/statistics/performance-indicators/european-innovation-scoreboard/eis.

enables thanks to a change in dimension in terms of profile, structure, governance and scale:

- Member profile: ATHENA includes universities with different profiles in order to integrate their respective expertise and bring multidisciplinary solutions to the major challenges of our times. This is why we include comprehensive universities, specialised universities, such as universities of technology, as well as universities of applied sciences.

- Structure: The Hubs (see below) at the core of ATHENA are co-designed with private, public and third sector stakeholders to bring global knowledge to local use and ensure that scientific and technological developments are connected to societal priorities.

- Governance: Students, staff and external stakeholders are part of ATHENA's decision-making bodies, to allow for broad discussions about the scientific and technological developments that we foster, and ensure that such developments respond to collective priorities for the future, and are embedded in the societal and political fabric of the regions.

- European scale: ATHENA approaches and solutions are designed at the European level, tapping into the combined forces of our regions and emphasising how widening countries can contribute to Europe as much as other countries.

This approach in turn translates into our core missions of education, research, innovation and societal outreach.

Our core missions

As locally committed higher education and research institutions, our mission has always been to bring global knowledge to local use: to train young minds to creativity and innovation, and to investigate, develop and critically assess technological transformations for and within our societies. With ATHENA University, this mission takes on a specific direction, as we place at the heart of our activities a deep awareness of how technologies can be used as a path for inclusion, fully integrating perspectives from the arts, social sciences and humanities. ATHENA's specific mission is thus to provide students, researchers and regional stakeholders with the skills and resources not only to understand and assess but also to develop solutions for local and global challenges, which always integrate the human dimension.

This requires us to define clear transformative priorities across our core missions and in particular in Education, Research and Innovation, and Societal Outreach.

Our priorities in Education

Our main ambition in Education is to improve the quality of our courses and increase the diversity of our offer. To achieve this we will move from a single university level offer to an ATHENA University level offer and deliver a growing number of official degrees and certificates as ATHENA degrees and certificates.

This institutional transformation will increase our global visibility and recognition and our local impact thanks to a progressive transformation of our existing offer and the development of new programmes that answer the following priorities:

- Our educational offer needs to align with both global trends and the needs of our local stakeholders (private, public and third sector actors) to address the challenges that our territories are facing[12].

- We must enrich the understanding of our students about the different facets of contemporary challenges, and their local and cultural specificities in different regions. This requires us to provide our students with seamless international mobility opportunities to study and learn through work-based experiences. In this, we must ensure that mobility opportunities are also available for students with specific needs (professionals, working students, people with less opportunities, people with children, etc.). Technology is key in this respect, for example providing blended and virtual mobility solutions for those who cannot travel easily, and improving accessibility of our international education offer for students with specific needs.

- We must foster students' ability to cooperate and empathise with peers of different backgrounds, languages and cultures. For this, it is crucial that all students can engage in challenge-based projects with their international peers, for example through Blended Intensive Programmes, summer/winter schools, hackathons, language cafés, etc.

- We must translate our deep commitment to our core values of equity and inclusion, by providing specific tools and assistance for any student who wishes to experience internationalisation, in accordance with the alliance's personalised approach to student needs.

Strategic objective - Education

These priorities translate into an approach that will focus on
1. Integrating our existing educational offer and developing new joint programmes such as the first ATHENA Joint MSc[13].
2. Promoting a challenge-based interdisciplinary approach by creating courses linked to the Hubs and Clusters (see below).
3. Develop Seamless mobility by aligning our learning outcomes and finalising the implementation of the Erasmus Without Paper Initiative, European Student Card and European Diploma, thus ensuring that experiencing Europe[14] becomes an ordinary element for our diverse body of students.

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[12] This approach will notably benefit from the ATHENA Higher Education Market Observatory, running since 2020, which collects information about global trends and best practices, and the ATHENA Labour Market Needs Report, which focuses on local and territorial needs.

[13] This is based on the European Approach for Joint Degrees. To develop joint degrees in Engineering, ATHENA has notably joined the JEDI initiative piloted by ENHANCE, EELISA and EUt+ thus advancing towards true European standards.

[14] "Experiencing Europe" is a key goal towards the construction of the European Education Area, as declared by the past commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics: "[...] European Universities [...] will act as role models for others across the EU. They will enable the next generations of students to experience Europe by studying in different countries."

Our priorities in Research and Innovation

Research and Innovation policy requires a careful balancing of bottom-up and top-down processes, critical mass and individual initiative. From an institutional perspective, by coming together at ATHENA level, we aim to combine our European potential in order to better serve our regions and our territorial stakeholders.

We will explore this through Sandbox initiatives, Clusters and Hubs (see below), which together combine the need for exploration of new ideas at European level with that of consolidating transversal interdisciplinary in areas in which our critical mass can enable us both to gain international visibility and truly impact on our regional ecosystems. This approach will benefit our stakeholders by:

- Providing direct access to the complementary capacities and expertise of our partners and notably to their research facilities and their links with National Research Organisations.
- Connect globally thanks to ATHENA staff and students, who will have experienced multiple locations and cultures across Europe and who can help transfer this ATHENA knowledge into society.
- Connect the networks of local and regional stakeholders in which our member institutions participate, for example the EU macro-regional strategies (Baltic Sea region, Danube region, Alpine region and Ionic-Adriatic region) and the interregional programmes between our regions (Region Norte in Portugal and Galicia in Spain) as well as other European infrastructure projects.
- Attract more international students and researchers to our regions, who will see in our pockets of excellence and in our institutions a thriving and welcoming work environment.

Strategic objective - Research and Innovation

By developing this approach, we aim notably to:

1. Define and drive an ATHENA level Research Strategy that ensures global visibility and aligns with regional needs
2. Develop a seamless use and sharing of scientific resources, facilities and capacities among our members to enhance the impact of our research and innovation activities, building on the existing ATHENA resources directory.
3. Focus on challenges that require interdisciplinary approaches at a European level and are identified with external stakeholders in order to ensure their alignment with major territorial and societal priorities.
4. Establish gender mainstreaming in research and innovation as an integral part of our processes.
5. Increase our capacity to obtain competitive funding notably at a European level through Horizon Europe calls.
6. Improve our support and structured collaborations with our respective ecosystems (for example, by offering an industrial partner a larger breadth of technical facilities and competencies, support in business-related development, and access to a wider network of ecosystems)

Our priorities in Societal Outreach

In line with our role as major regional actors and with our values, one of the ATHENA core objectives is to enhance our societal impact and outreach beyond academia and at a European scale. In the past years, ATHENA has extensively worked in this respect, running a number of flagship initiatives: the ATHENA Talks, the ATHENA Research Book and the ATHENA Conferences. In alignment with our current focus on institutionalising and channelling excellent bottom-up activities, we will implement actions at different levels:

- Ensure continuous dialogue and exchanges with external stakeholders, making them an integral part of the co-development of the activities of our Hubs.
- Develop communication and dissemination strategies designed and tailored to address our varied target audiences and to facilitate exchanges and collaborations between our internal communities and our key stakeholders.
- Promote and foster a cultural change in our academic staff towards Open Science, Open Education and Citizen Science[15] as common practices through raising awareness, providing specific training and recognising their engagement in societal outreach activities.
- Advocate Open Science principles world-wide, by signing as a single entity recent declarations and agreements[16] and actively participate in these global efforts.
- Champion a culture of diversity, inclusiveness and personal and environmental well-being through targeted initiatives such as the Gender Equality Unit, the Diversity and Inclusion Unit and Mental Well-Being Programme and our interconnected and environmentally sustainable campuses.

Strategic objective - Societal Outreach

We aim for a broader and deeper societal impact and outreach, by:

1. Facilitating the connection and engagement of internal communities and external target audiences, creating visibility both for ATHENA and for the European University Initiative;
2. Ensuring an inclusive and supportive environment;
3. Creating an open, stimulating ecosystem, ensuring the best conditions for research and education activities tackling societal challenges, and contributing to the UN SDGs and EU Societal Challenges;
4. Contributing to the realisation of the ambitions of the European Open science policy by providing open access to a wide pool of common resources across all our missions, focused on our priority areas, and by engaging in targeted outreach and communication activities.

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[15] The European Union has identified 8 ambitions with respect to Open Science to which ATHENA is fully committed.
[16] For instance: the COARA agreement, DORA declaration.

Our Strategic Goals

In order to implement the priorities defined above we have defined a set of Strategic Goals for each core mission.

SG 1: Becoming ATHENA University

- SG 1.1: Enhance ATHENA's implementation and coordination capacities through matrix management and participation of democratically elected instances.
- SG 1.2: Foster our broad European community of students, researchers and administrative staff
- SG 1.3: Reinforce ATHENA's identity through a common organisational framework, making ATHENA a model for HE cooperation
- SG 1.4: Maintain effective, accountable, and transparent connections towards internal and external stakeholders
- SG 1.5: Develop and foster an open approach for sharing knowledge (research and teaching) to increase the breadth and the depth of ATHENA's impact.

SG2: Increase ATHENA Impact and Relevance

- SG 2.1: Further develop and promote an interdisciplinary approach for education, research and innovation to advance technology for the good of society
- SG 2.2: Further our future-proof pan-European educational strategy based on challenge-oriented, and collaborative pedagogy, which puts students and their success at its centre
- SG 2.3: Foster ATHENA's scientific international visibility and competitiveness by promoting intra-alliance collaborations, by strengthening cooperation in all fields, and by leveraging shared research facilities and platforms
- SG 2.4: Increase ATHENA's impact on local stakeholders, by sharing its knowledge capacities and facilities to foster strategic partnerships based on joint action
- SG 2.5: Contribute to the transition of our regions towards sustainable smart growth focussing on three domains of specialisation: digitalisation for all, sustainable production, health and nutrition
- SG 2.6: Connect our regions to global dynamics

SG 3 Improve ATHENA Quality of Life

- SG 3.1: Implement an inclusive approach that embraces diversity and equality at all institutional levels (from governance to voluntary-based activities)
- SG 3.2: Promote the wellbeing of our students and staff, by providing them with all the opportunities and conditions for their personal and career growth.
- SG 3.3: Attracting and retaining talents to foster the competitiveness of our institutions and the development of our regions
- SG 3.4: Progress towards gender equality, especially in areas where the unbalance is greater (e.g. leadership, specific disciplines, ...)
- SG 3.5: Create a network of model campuses, connected and green

Our Institutional Model and Strategy

Addressing the challenges outlined above and fulfilling our strategic goals requires not only vision and commitment but also an adapted governance, structure and strategy.

Whereas the first phase of ATHENA was driven thanks to bottom-up initiatives and managed as a project, the second phase has been marked by a strategic shift, symbolised in terms of governance, structure, human resources and budget. This shift is the result of a conviction that ATHENA University is our future.

> **Learning from failure**
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> When ATHENA failed to be renewed on the call for projects of the European Commission in June 2023, we had a three-way choice: (1) consider that ATHENA had come to an end and continue our individual paths, (2) pursue our ongoing activities and reapply to the 2024 call with a more solid proposal, (3) radically change our approach by accelerating our institutional trajectory and re-think our strategic roadmap and future activities, to reapply to the 2024 call with a transformative yet solid proposal.
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> Following various discussions involving students, staff and external stakeholders, we decided to follow the third path and accelerate our institutional trajectory, independently of being or not selected in the forthcoming 2024 call for projects.
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> The following key aspects are a direct result of this decision and have been implemented from September 2023.

A strong integrated central governance

An ambition such as the one that we have just described implies a major transformation and requires strong leadership. This in turn can only be achieved through an integration of the different levels of governance of our respective institutions.

To achieve this requires trust, which is why the nine Rectors/Presidents of our initial core of nine universities have been meeting every Monday since September 2023 and will continue to do so independently of the result of the European University Erasmus+ Call[17], together with the Rector of Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, our tenth member. They have personally taken responsibility not only for approving this document but also for drafting it and this level of commitment has had a direct impact on the involvement of other senior figures in our respective universities.

During the first phase, bottom-up proposals were discussed by the Steering Committee (mainly composed of Vice-Rectors for International Affairs) as part of the ATHENA project and ultimately approved by the Governing Board. Since September 2023, the Vice Rectors for Research, Education and Innovation discuss their strategy in Education, Research and Innovation at the ATHENA level and have responsibility for ensuring that individual university level strategies are aligned with the ATHENA University strategy.

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[17] Between 2020 and 2023, the Rectors/Presidents of ATHENA members met 4 times a year, twice physically and twice virtually. The frequency of meetings has thus been multiplied by a factor of ten.

Similarly, we will be implementing in spring 2024 an ATHENA level Board that will be an emanation of each of our Boards. This will ensure that decisions at each university level take into account the ATHENA perspective and align with it, just as today, Faculty Boards refer to their University Board, and Department Councils refer to their Faculty Board.

New structures for a new university

Currently our universities are structured around Faculties and Departments. Like in most universities around the world, these are mostly based on disciplinary fields, defined and governed by academics and they operate within a national context. In practice it is at this level that education and research policy is largely defined and implemented.

The first phase of ATHENA had little impact on this reality, because ATHENA initiatives were bottom-up and were built either alongside or in addition to these key structures. However, some ATHENA initiatives such as our Clusters did successfully showcase the potential of working transversely across countries, disciplinary boundaries and with external stakeholders around specific scientific, societal and technological challenges.

Building on these achievements, ATHENA University has started institutionalising our approach around new structures that are meant not only to ensure the success of our joint initiatives but to transform our own institutions by shifting from a classical model of faculties and departments to one in which research and education are shaped and implemented in transversal challenge-based structures such as our clusters and hubs.

Sandbox initiatives

At the heart of our approach, we consider it crucial to maintain a bottom-up perspective, which enables anyone within our institutions to come up with innovative ideas. These are meant to experiment new approaches to our educational, research and innovation activities and to administrative procedures.

The approach is designed in a simple way, through open calls that are evaluated by a committee that integrates academic staff, administrative staff, students and external stakeholders. It is financed through internal resources within our university, with top-up money from European, Regional or National calls being used as extra incentives.

If successful, an initiative can either apply to become a Cluster or, in particular for student initiatives and/or those that concern administrative procedures, can directly be deployed at the scale of the alliance.

Clusters

Clusters were one of the most successful initiatives of our first three years[18]. They are led by a core of 10 to 15 researchers from at least 3 partner universities around a specific scientific,

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[18] For example, the cluster on *Digital Transformation in Heritage Preservation and Analysis*, bridging humanities and technology, brought together 3 institutions (University of Orléans, University of Siegen and Hellenic Mediterranean University) supported by external funding, developing common innovative educational courses and research projects.

technological or societal challenge in order to design new course modules or courses and explore potential research and/or innovation opportunities.

The process for establishing clusters works through bi-annual calls with an evaluation team that includes not only senior academic staff but also students and external stakeholders.

Hubs

Hubs are at the core of ATHENA University. They are established by decision of the Governing Board on the proposal of the Steering Committee, when a critical mass of over 100 researchers from at least 3 member universities has been established. Hubs are established in areas where ATHENA University combines a demonstrated scientific potential, a strong network of external partners, notably from industry, and which answer clearly defined societal priorities.

Each Hub is funded by a combination of projects (such as the ERASMUS+ call for European Universities) and structural funding allocated by the partner universities.

Hubs are ATHENA level structures, but they are embedded in existing universities. This means that they propose budgets and participate in recruitment processes within each member university.

Three Hubs have been identified, based on established strengths and collaborations, and will guide ATHENA's transdisciplinary and challenge-based approaches:

- Digitalisation for All
- Sustainable Production
- Health and Nutrition

Common HR and budgetary processes

The success of our Hubs and Clusters will only be possible if they play a truly structural role within our universities. This implies not only ensuring their financial sustainability, but, maybe even more importantly, ensuring that they are supported by common commitments at the level of internal resources (infrastructures, HR) and shared discussions about annual budgets within our universities.

Internal resources and HR Processes

The sharing of research and technological infrastructures, and the creation, when needed, of new ones is essential to support the operations of our Clusters and Hubs, and more generally to implement our common research and innovation strategy. ATHENA can already rely on the Shared Resources Directory for the sharing of its research infrastructures. In the future, we will strengthen the availability and accessibility of these infrastructures and implement a strategy of mutualisation: we will avoid the duplication of equipment so as to diversify the types of resources available and we will promote the specialisation of each partner, thus fostering complementarity.

As Public Universities, we will be required to abide by national legal frameworks in managing all internal HR processes for the foreseeable future. This is a major constraint not only because most of our budget is spent on HR but, even more importantly, because it is through recruitment and promotion processes that we can put in place a truly integrated European strategy.

To address this issue, we have taken a series of commitments to align, within the constraints of national regulations, the recruitment of academic and administrative positions of each university with ATHENA priorities and overall strategy:

- The HR Strategy for Researchers label will become a common standard across all ATHENA members[19].
- Each existing faculty and department will take into account ATHENA priorities in their recruitment processes.
- Each new position will include a paragraph on ATHENA and the potential role that the new staff member will play within ATHENA.
- We will progressively align our recruitment and promotion processes according to common ATHENA standards.
- We will create a new ATHENA Faculty.

ATHENA Faculty

The ATHENA Faculty serves as a prototype for a true joint academic unit. It brings together scholars and students in collaborative teams, addressing both innovative interdisciplinary topics and our well-established domains of excellence. As an autonomous entity operating with an international legal status, it affords a dedicated environment for education and discovery without boundaries. Positioned within the broader academic landscape, the ATHENA Faculty assumes the role of a lighthouse, providing visibility and delineating a path for others to follow.

The ATHENA Faculty comprises all actors involved in the ATHENA educational offer. It systematically operates and supports our joint programmes, such as ATHENA joint courses and joint degrees (including Erasmus Mundus), ATHENA BIPs (blended intensive programmes) and joint ATHENA modules in our doctoral schools. It supports the development of joint PhD programmes. The Faculty council validates the integration of the education and training offers according to a common set of standards conferring the ATHENA teaching label and awards. It allows for an exploratory space beyond national regulations, e.g. in the areas of multilingual education or AI-assisted personalisation of educational pathways.

The Faculty includes and integrates all relevant and active actors in the joint fields of work, as defined by the Clusters and Hubs of ATHENA. Each academic member reports on a yearly basis on goals and achievements in the context of the ATHENA Faculty to justify his individual participation. Faculty members get preferential support from ATHENA services and participate in the strategic definition of proposals towards hiring-policy and strategic recruitment of the ATHENA partners in the thematic areas of the Faculty.

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[19] Currently, half of our universities have obtained this label: Maria Curie - Skłodowska University, University of Maribor, University of Orléans, University of Siegen, University of Vigo.

Annual Budget

The budgetary process of each of our universities is currently defined by national legal frameworks, however the standard procedures are comparable and involve the following steps: consolidation of demands at departmental / faculty / school level, proposal by the Rector, approval by the Board. As we move towards an ATHENA approach, we will

- Align budgetary processes and discussions of each member institution towards a common approach;
- Integrate the Clusters and Hubs in the process of consolidation of budgetary demands within each university;
- Define common priorities to be taken into account by the governance of each university;
- Hold common discussion at ATHENA level of each university's budget as a means of sharing good practices and approaches.

Common standards

Creating a true ATHENA strategy and identity entails deeply transforming the cultures and procedures of our individual institutions and moving towards a common institutional framework, which will enable us to go beyond national constraints.

This will notably take place by progressively shifting towards common standards at the European level. These will be put in place progressively and will concern in priority areas where the European dimension can truly improve existing practices. They concern administrative processes as well as those connected to our core missions.

Legal status

There is currently no European legal status that would enable the delegation of competences to a common structure on a model similar to the one we would like to implement. We will therefore work with other European Universities[20] to explore possible models of legal status.

In the short term, we are setting up a not-for-profit association under Belgium law[21]. This status enables us to implement activities with international scope; it is simple to set up and flexible. It will enable us to pursue integrated cooperation, experiment with joint management of structures such as the ATHENA Faculty, engage with external parties as a single entity, and formally move from being a project to becoming an International Organisation.

Together, as ATHENA University, we aim to act as a role model for cooperation among higher education institutions, showing how through diversity and inclusion we can build a more competitive, integrated, and resilient Europe.

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[20] In particular those involved in the Pilot call "institutionalised EU cooperation instruments to explore the feasibility for a possible European legal status for alliances of higher education institutions".
[21] The EC2U report describes the existing legal alternatives. It is on this basis, amongst others, that ATHENA has chosen AISBL (*Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif*) as a temporary option, following the lead of European Universities such as EU-CONEXUS, EUNICE or UNA EUROPA.

Endorsement of the Mission Statement

Michael Z. Zgurovsky **Rector Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute**	**Nikolaos Katsarakis** **Rector Hellenic Mediterranean University**
Radosław Dobrowolski **Rector Maria Curie-Skłodowska University**	**Zdravko Kačič** **Rector University of Maribor**
Éric Blond **President University of Orléans**	**Paulo Pereira** **President Polytechnic Institute of Porto**
Fabio Pollice **Rector University of Salento**	**Stefanie Reese** **Rector University of Siegen**
Manuel Joaquín Reigosa Roger **Rector University of Vigo**	**Romualdas Kliukas** **Rector Vilnius Gediminas Technical University**

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