

HEROES FOCUS

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Fostering regional resilience through science

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HEROES

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Research Magazine

Higher Education for
Resilience-Oriented and
Empowered Societies

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Welcome to the first number of the HEROES Science Magazine



In this edition, the broad structure and goals of the HEROES4REGIONS, the joint practice-oriented scientific research hub, that constitutes Work Package 5 (WP5) are presented.

An overview of the Points of Development (POD's) of WP5 is presented: Agriculture and Food; Circular Economy; Digital Transformation; Care and Wellbeing; Education, Learning and Inclusion, and Regional Development.

Interviews with a researcher from VIKO, Alina Katunian, and a researcher from IPBeja, João Dias are in this first issue of the Science Magazine. The interview with Alina provides a reflection on the question: "Why do we need new partners?" The EU faces many new challenges: climate change, globalisation, war, the energy crisis, population ageing, etc. Answers to questions about joint research are provided in this interview.

The interview with João Dias presents an example of applied research connecting modern AI with the ancestral methods of sheep milk cheese production of southern Alentejo. Nowadays traditional methods and the associated culture face severe challenges. Applied research universities are part of the effort to preserve tradition and culture in Europe.

Joint research with seed funding is approached after these interviews. Namely the Small-Scale Cooperation Projects that are now being evaluated. During the next few years we will see more calls for these small scale cooperation projects. At the same time a large set of proposals to Horizon projects are being launched. In the next Science Magazines we will have an opportunity to write about these efforts. Always with the conscience that we are at the beginning of the path.

The Semi-annual meeting in Vilnius coincides with the launching of the Science Magazine. It is a much expected event that provides a renewed strength to the HEROES project. We are very happy to launch the magazine at a place where the importance of having new partners in research and education is deeply recognised.

We hope that the research community will enjoy reading the several Science Magazine issues during the next few years. This sense of enjoyment will derive from the general sense of joy that a researcher feels during the several stages of his work: the curiosity about an unsolved problem; the search for answers provide by other researchers; the eureka moments when a new solution crosses his mind; the experimental phase and dissemination of the work to the society. Being a good researcher is not looking just at how much money you can earn or career development, is about feeling good by providing other humans with solutions that solve problems.

We also hope that the wider community will become aware of HEROES' research capabilities and contact researchers regarding problems that could be solved with the help of HEROES.

José Jasnau Caeiro





1- INTRODUCTION

HEROES. The word etymology remits to those who, facing danger, fight adversity using courage, ingenuity or strength. Every human culture honours "heroes". Resilience to adversities, and fast adaptation to change, is the goal of HEROES, using an agile approach.

The HEROES Alliance is constituted by a set of **9 professional higher education institutions** with an inter-university campus organized in flagship areas. **HEROES4REGIONS** is one of those areas, and Work Package 5 is part of this area.

Work package 5 is the joint practice-oriented scientific research hub. The goal of this hub is to strengthen joint, practice-oriented scientific research capabilities, by:

- establishing flexible interinstitutional POD-networks around key research areas and co-create common research agendas;
- developing and implementing an action plan for the sharing of research facilities and selected support services;
- developing and implementing a joint challenge-based innovation programme;
- supporting the development of small-scale research, development, innovation and valorisation projects.

WP5 is part of the flagship 'HEROES4REGIONS', highlighting the fact that the themes for the PODs support the regional smart specialization strategies (S3); in other words supporting the regional development and resilience of the regions.

The focus of this issue is to provide a broad overview of the structure, goals, tasks and people of Work Package 5.

1.1. THE WORK PACKAGE MANAGEMENT LIASION GROUP

The partner institutions take part at the Work Package management level through a liasion group. The people currently involved in this group are:

- Alina Katunian (VIKO, Lithuania);
- Bas Ouwehand (FON, The Netherlands);
- Christian Schopf and Ekaterina Mashina (THD, Germany);
- José Jasnaú Caeiro (IPB, Portugal);
- Kris Vancluysen (TM, Belgium);
- Magnus Jonsson (HH, Sweden);

- Petra Coufalóva (MEN, Czech Republic);
- Susanne Dau and Stinne Mark Christiansen (UCN, Denmark);
- Anne-Maria Mäkelä (SEAMK, Finland).

1.2. THE PODs

The POD networks are central to the cooperation effort in HEROES. These interinstitutional research networks, are created within key research areas that reflect the strengths of the partners.

The list of POD networks is:

- **Agriculture and food;**
- **Care and wellbeing;**
- **Circular economy;**
- **Digital transformation;**
- **Education, learning & inclusion;**
- **Regional development.**

The research PODs have POD facilitators that conduct the activities. These facilitators play a crucial role in guiding collaboration within and between the PODs. They organise a series of activities:

- online meetings;
- physical meetings;
- peer-to-peer online lunch workshops;
- thematic brainstorming retreats;
- strategic research agenda feedback sessions with local stakeholders.

The most important implicit outcome of the PODs is making the researchers to work together in joint project proposals for Grant Acquisition (Horizon Europe, COST, Interreg, and Erasmus+).

An internal HEROES initiative of WP5 are the **Small Scale Cooperation Projects**, that will stimulate the appearance of joint challenge based applied research initiatives.

It is a first step for students and teachers to start to work together across the HEROES alliance.

The global POD facilitators are aided by local POD facilitators at each partner university. These local POD facilitators contact local researchers and ask them to join the PODs.

The researchers community is not forced to join the PODs. The opportunity to talk to people with common research interests across Europe is meant to create the critical mass for new and more ambitious research goals. This is a synergistic process and based on the natural creativity and desire to exchange and apply the scientific knowledge with peers.

According to applied scientific research common interests, the PODs are further divided into sub-PODs.

2. EACH POD

2.1. AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

The POD assembles expert networks in sustainable agri-food systems, business management and economics in agri-food, nutrition, food safety, agrisciences, horticulture, agriculture and forestry.

Mendel University in Brno (MENDELU) is a prestigious public institution in the Czech Republic, renowned for its focus on life sciences, agriculture, and forestry. Established in 1919, it is the oldest independent university of its kind in the country and is named after Gregor Johann Mendel, the "father of genetics," who conducted his groundbreaking experiments in Brno.

The Agriculture and Food POD is led by Jakub Pečenka, specifically associated with the Faculty of Horticulture in Lednice. He is joined by local POD facilitators belonging to FON, IPB, SEAMK, TM, VIKO and more recently THD.



2.2. CARE AND WELLBEING

The Care and Wellbeing POD brings together expert networks working in health promotion and physical activity, psychosocial interventions, (mental) healthcare and rehabilitation, as well as care and wellbeing technologies.

The POD is facilitated by **Thomas More University of Applied Sciences**, the largest university of applied sciences in Flanders, Belgium, and a member of the KU Leuven Association.

The Care and Wellbeing POD is supported by **Kris Vancluysen** (staff member for research internationalisation), working closely with expert facilitators from the Thomas More Centre of Expertise Care and Wellbeing. Within this centre of expertise, three research groups focus on innovation and technology in health and welfare through practice-based research, with the aim of increasing the social and economic impact of care solutions. These include Mobilab & Care (represented by Karolien Baldewijns), the Living and Care Lab LiCalab (represented by Hilde Vandenhoudt), and People and Wellbeing (represented by Dorien Vandendorre).

The POD is further strengthened by the active participation of local members from FON, HH, IPB, MEN, SEAMK, THD, UCN, and VIKO.

2.3. CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Expert networks in circular business models, sustainable entrepreneurship, circularity of (building) materials, resource wisdom and resource efficiency, are the key elements of this POD.

SEAMK, refers to the **Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences** (Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoulu), a leading multidisciplinary institution located in Western Finland.

It is consistently ranked as one of the best universities of applied sciences in the country, particularly noted for its high student satisfaction and strong ties to the regional economy.

SEAMK has frequently been ranked #1 or in the top 3 in the national graduation feedback survey (AVOP) in Finland, specifically for its learning environments and student support services.

Leading the POD are **Kari Laasasenaho**, whose work is primarily focused on environmental technology and sustainable land use within the context of the Finnish bioeconomy, his research is highly specialized in the transition to renewable energy and sustainable resource management, and **Sanna Joensuu-Salo**, a distinguished academic and lead researcher specializing in entrepreneurship and business growth. She is recognized as one of the primary experts in Finland regarding SME (Small and Medium-sized Enterprise) development and business transfers.

Kari and Sanna count with the participation of FON, HH, IPB, MEN, THD, TM, UCN and VIKO.

2.4. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

This transversal POD assembles experts in extended reality, applied artificial intelligence, embedded systems, middleware, 3D scanning, high-performance computing, spatial computing, modelling and printing, data science,

digital twins, robotics, intelligent mobility and (industrial) IoT, digital ethics, usability engineering.

Deggendorf Institute of Technology (DIT), is a public research university in Lower Bavaria, Germany. Founded in 1994, it has rapidly become one of Germany's most innovative and international universities of applied sciences.

Florian Wahl, Armin Gerl and Ekaterina Mashina are the POD facilitators of Digital Transformation.

Florian Wahl, is a Professor at the Deggendorf Institute of Technology (THD/DIT) and focuses on the sensors and AI hardware for care, Armin Gerl focuses on the data architecture, privacy, and legal frameworks that make those systems viable in the real world.

Ekaterina Mashina is a researcher and academic staff member at the Deggendorf Institute of Technology (THD). She is a core part of the "Smart Region" and AI research team, often working alongside colleagues like Florian Wahl and Armin Gerl to implement advanced technologies in rural and healthcare settings.

The participants in the Digital Transformation POD include FON, HH, IPB, MEN, SEAMK, TM, UCN, and VIKO.



2.5. EDUCATION, LEARNING & INCLUSION

The POD assembles experts in educational research, inclusion in pedagogy and education, teaching and teachers professional identity, multimodal and digital learning, quality of learning in different educational settings.

University College Northern Denmark (UCN) is a leading Danish institution of higher education focused on "real-life" education, where theory is strictly integrated with professional practice.

Headquartered in Aalborg, it is one of five universities colleges in Denmark.

Susanne Dau is a senior researcher and academic leader at the Research Centre for Professional Development at University College Northern Denmark (UCN). She is a specialist in the fields of digital learning and educational development.

Partner institutions in the **Education, Learning and Inclusion POD** are: FON, HH, IPB, TM, VIKO and SEAMK.

2.6. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A set of expert networks in business/innovation ecosystems, innovative tourism, rural development and smart cities and communities, are part of this POD.

Halmstad University (Högskolan i Halmstad) is a modern, innovation-driven public university located on the scenic southwest coast of Sweden. Established in 1983, it has gained an international reputation for its "big little university" feel—combining high-tech research with a friendly, accessible campus.

As of 2026, it is ranked among the top 10 universities in Sweden.

Magnus Jonsson is a Professor Halmstad University, Sweden. He is a prominent figure in HH and plays a vital role in the university's strategic research. As of 2026, he serves as a Programme Manager for one of the university's two primary profile areas: Smart Cities and Communities.

The set of partner institutions in this POD is FON, IPB, MEN, SEAMK, TM, UCN, and VIKO.

3. CONCLUSION

Work Package 5 will hopefully develop a strong and resilient set of networks of researchers from the partner

and associated partner institutions of HEROES. The end demonstration will be the number of involved researchers and also the number of joint projects that will be submitted for grant acquisition.

During the first year: the PODs were established; a research facilities sharing protocol, in the form of guidelines, was written; an overview of the research management structure of the partner institutions was delivered, and thematic brainstorming retreats have taken place.

The year of 2026 will result in the first set of small scale cooperation projects being approved, with the launch of the call in March, during the International Week at Thomas More.

A set of projects from each POD, searching for grant acquisition from Horizon calls are underway.

But most important now is to reach for more researchers and to get the whole community, also including students, stakeholders and staff, participating in this effort.



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3.1. HEROES Research PODs

3.1.1. Agriculture and food

From Vision to Consortium: Shaping Joint Agri-Food Initiatives

The Food and Agriculture POD within the HEROES alliance represents a multidisciplinary response to the most pressing challenges of the European Green Deal. Our mission is to bridge the gap between advanced technological research and the practical needs of sustainable primary production. By integrating expertise from across our partner regions we are building a robust framework for the next generation of agri-food innovations.

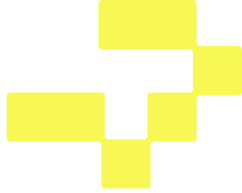


Visit of the Seinäjoki team (Finland) to the Department of Food Technology, Faculty of AgriSciences MENDELU, within the Food Symposium conference and the TBR meeting. Joint discussions on consortium building for future Horizon Europe calls.

We leverage collective expertise in digital innovations. Our focus is on increasing agricultural resilience in water- and nutrient-scarce environments by translating biological plant needs into technical requirements and precise monitoring systems. The alliance also explores the sustainable use of natural resources, with a specific emphasis on the restoration of degraded soils. This includes innovating within the waste-to-value chain, focusing on by-product processing and renewable energy solutions like biofuels to enhance farm profitability. We are committed to fostering resilient food production systems that support agrobiodiversity. This includes integrated approaches to terrestrial livestock production, focusing on feed efficiency, microbiome health, and the reduction of environmental impacts. Beyond production, our agenda includes the entire Farm2Fork spectrum. We study food innovation and consumer behavior through interactive research tools, aiming to understand the socio-economic and ethical motivations behind food choices.

Our current efforts are strategically directed toward the Horizon Europe calls. A key focus is the formation of a competitive consortium, currently being developed under the leadership of the team from Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, specifically targeting one of the Farm2Fork calls. POD members synchronize their research infrastructures, ranging from high-tech labs to experimental farms, orchards, living labs and fields, into a competitive consortium. By combining agronomic expertise, data interpretation, and scientific analysis, the HEROES PoD is preparing to deliver solutions for a future of European agriculture.

Jakub Pečenka



3.1.2. Care and Wellbeing

The Care and Wellbeing POD of the HEROES Alliance brings together researchers from across the HEROES Alliance who share a common ambition: improving health, wellbeing, and inclusive care in a rapidly changing society. Facilitated by the Centre of Expertise Care and Wellbeing at Thomas More University of Applied Sciences, the POD has grown into a living network of around 50 researchers representing all HEROES partners. Its work spans areas such as health promotion, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and care technologies, all contributing to the alliance's broader goal of strengthening people's resilience.

Building a Shared Research Direction

A key moment in the POD's development was a thematic brainstorming session held during the HEROES semi-annual meeting at Halmstad University in October 2025. During this meeting, researchers from different disciplines and institutions came together to define a first shared research agenda, grounded in collective expertise, mutual interests, and open dialogue.

This agenda revolves around a set of interconnected themes. One prominent focus is inclusion in health, technology, and sport, ensuring that innovation reaches diverse populations and helps reduce inequalities in access to care. Another central theme is the integration of healthcare technology with mental health, physical activity, digital literacy, and chronic care, reflecting the growing need for interdisciplinary approaches to complex health challenges.

The strength of this agenda lies in the complementary expertise available across the alliance. From community health and active ageing to artificial intelligence in healthcare, simulation-based education, and digital health solutions, the POD brings together perspectives that support a holistic view of wellbeing, one that extends beyond clinical settings to include social, behavioural, and technological dimensions.

Turning Collaboration into Impact

To move from shared ideas to tangible outcomes, the POD has developed a structured yet flexible programme of

activities. These include thematic online lunch meetings, the initiation of joint research collaborations, and annual face-to-face meetings. Together, they create opportunities for knowledge exchange, partnership building, and the joint development of European research proposals, including under programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

Equally important is the POD's strong emphasis on bottom-up initiatives. Researchers are encouraged to propose new ideas and collaborations, allowing projects to emerge organically based on shared interests and emerging societal needs. These initiatives may take shape within the POD, in collaboration with other HEROES PODs, or through sub-PODs or links with educational programmes, local stakeholders, and associated partners.

Several such initiatives have already taken off. Activities include a physical brainstorming session with local stakeholders on the use of AI in health, as well as collaborations focusing on heart failure care, place-based approaches to loneliness, diabetic care in the Global South, advanced cognitive abilities, and the mental health of children and young adults. By nurturing these bottom-up efforts, the Care and Wellbeing POD functions as a living research network: adaptive, responsive, and closely aligned with emerging challenges, funding opportunities, and evolving European policy priorities.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, the continued alignment of research priorities and the further development of joint collaborations will be important to maximising impact. These collaborations



may take many forms: small-scale or large-scale, including contributions to advisory groups, joint research proposals and publications, and joint participation in international conferences. A physical meeting to be planned for the second half of 2026 will offer another opportunity to deepen collaboration within the network and strengthen ties with associated partners, reinforcing the POD's role as a collaborative hub for care and wellbeing research in the HEROES Alliance.

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3.1.3. Circular Economy

Environmental Proactivity and SME Performance – A Joint Research Initiative within the HEROES Circular Economy POD

The Circular Economy POD within the HEROES alliance aims to strengthen collaborative research and knowledge creation related to circular economy transformation, sustainable business models, and innovation in European regions. The POD brings together researchers from several universities and universities of applied sciences who share an interest in understanding how organizations, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), can transition toward more sustainable and circular ways of operating.

Research Agenda guide collaboration

The joint research agenda of the Circular Economy POD identifies several key themes that guide the consortium's collaboration. First, the partners are interested in understanding how circular business models and value chains can be scaled and implemented in practice. While many firms have adopted incremental improvements related to resource efficiency, achieving full circularity often requires deeper changes in organizational practices, collaboration networks, and value creation logic. Understanding these



transformation processes is therefore a central research priority.

The POD focuses on identifying organizational, behavioral, and policy-related barriers that may hinder the transition toward circular economy practices. Companies often face challenges related to knowledge, capabilities, incentives, and regulatory frameworks when implementing sustainable practices. Research is therefore needed to better understand how these barriers can be overcome and what types of competencies and capabilities organizations need in order to succeed in sustainability transitions.

The research agenda emphasizes the role of technology and innovation in accelerating circular transformation. Digital technologies, data-driven solutions, and new materials are increasingly important in enabling resource efficiency, waste reduction, and new forms of circular value creation. Understanding how firms can utilize such technologies effectively—and how these innovations influence business performance and sustainability outcomes—is therefore another key focus area.

Data collection on SMEs' environmental proactivity

In addition to these thematic priorities, the HEROES partners have expressed strong interest in developing joint empirical datasets that allow for comparative research across countries and sectors. Shared data collection enables researchers to explore how different institutional environments, industrial structures, and regional innovation systems influence the adoption of circular economy practices. Such collaborative research also strengthens the consortium's ability to produce high-quality scientific publications and to prepare joint project proposals for European research funding programs.

One concrete example of this collaborative research effort is the ongoing cross-country survey on environmental



proactivity in European SMEs. The study aims to examine how small and medium-sized firms approach environmental sustainability and how these practices relate to innovation, firm's capabilities, and business performance.

Environmental proactivity refers to the extent to which firms voluntarily adopt practices that reduce their environmental impact and integrate sustainability considerations into their core business operations. In SMEs, such initiatives may include actions such as reducing energy and water consumption, improving waste management, integrating environmental considerations into production processes, and communicating sustainability practices to customers and stakeholders.

While environmental sustainability has received increasing attention in recent years, relatively little comparative research exists on how proactively SMEs engage in environmental practices across different European contexts. SMEs play a critical role in the European economy, yet they often operate with limited resources and capabilities. Understanding the drivers and consequences of environmental proactivity in SMEs is therefore highly relevant both for academic research and for policy development.

To address this research gap, the Circular Economy POD has initiated a collaborative data collection effort among HEROES partners. The survey instrument focuses on several key dimensions of firm behavior and performance.

First, the survey measures environmental proactivity through a set of statements describing environmental practices within the firm. These include activities such as recycling waste, reducing energy and water consumption, providing environmental training for employees, integrating environmental considerations into production or service processes, and communicating environmental practices to customers and stakeholders. Respondents evaluate the

extent to which these statements describe their company's operations.

Second, the survey captures various aspects of firm performance and growth. Respondents are asked to assess their company's development compared to competitors in areas such as profitability, return on investment, sales growth, market share, and development of new products. These measures allow researchers to explore whether firms with stronger environmental orientation also demonstrate stronger performance outcomes.

Third, the questionnaire includes items related to innovation and dynamic capabilities. For example, the survey measures the firm's ability to acquire and utilize knowledge from different sources, respond to market changes, involve employees in innovation activities, and continuously evaluate new ideas for product development. In addition, these capabilities describe a firm's ability to adapt, integrate, and reconfigure internal and external resources in changing environments.

The survey also includes items on digitalization, examining how digital technologies support product development, process improvements, and the identification of new market opportunities. The questionnaire also measures strategic planning and inclusive leadership, capturing how firms implement their strategies and utilize diverse perspectives in decision-making. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive view of organizational capabilities that may support sustainable and innovative business development.

Cross-country dataset and research questions

Data collection for this study is currently ongoing across several countries within the HEROES network. The Finnish dataset has already been completed, and Deggendorf Institute of Technology has collected approximately 150 responses from SMEs in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Additional data collection is currently taking place in Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Portugal. The partners aim to finalize the data collection by the end of April 2026, after which the consortium will conduct joint data analysis during May and June. The preliminary results will be presented and discussed in Circular Economy POD meetings, and the dataset is expected to form the basis for joint scientific publications to be prepared in autumn 2026.

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The aim of this joint dataset is to enable cross-country comparative research on environmental proactivity in SMEs. By combining data from multiple countries, researchers will be able to analyze how environmental practices differ across institutional contexts and how these practices are associated with firm capabilities and performance outcomes.

More specifically, the research aims to address several key questions:

- What is the current level of environmental proactivity among European SMEs?
- How does environmental proactivity relate to firm performance, growth, and dynamic capabilities?
- How do digitalization and technological capabilities interact with environmental sustainability practices?
- What organizational factors, such as leadership practices and strategic planning, influence the adoption of environmental initiatives?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how SMEs can combine sustainability, innovation, and competitiveness. The results are expected to provide valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and business practitioners interested in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship and circular economy transformation.

From a research perspective, the joint dataset will enable multiple academic outputs, including comparative studies, joint publications, and collaborative research proposals within the HEROES network. The dataset also creates opportunities for longitudinal follow-up studies that could examine how SMEs' environmental practices evolve over time.

More broadly, this initiative illustrates how the HEROES Circular Economy POD can support meaningful international research collaboration. By combining the expertise of partners from different countries and by building shared empirical datasets, the consortium can generate new knowledge that supports the transition toward more sustainable and circular economies in Europe.

Sanna Joensuu-Salo and Kari Laasasenaho

3.1.4. Digital transformation

Connecting Regions, Research, and Digital Innovation: The HEROES Digital Transformation POD

Across Europe, universities are often praised for exchange: exchange of knowledge, methods, and perspectives across borders and disciplines. The more difficult question is what turns that exchange into something durable and concrete. Within the HEROES European University Alliance, the Digital Transformation Research POD is designed as one answer to that question. Its role is not simply to convene conversations, but to channel regional innovation potential into joint European research and transfer projects in a structured way. As one of the thematic research PODs under HEROES WP5, it defines a shared direction for 2026 to 2028 with a clear mission: to strengthen regional resilience and upskilling through digital technologies by combining applied research, SME cooperation, and open knowledge dissemination.

That mission gives the POD a practical identity. It is conceived as a collaborative engine within the alliance, bringing together partners that can act as regional hubs while working toward common European proposals. The currently participating institutions are Technische Hochschule Deggendorf, Mendel University in Brno, Thomas More University of Applied Sciences, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (SeAMK), Fontys University of Applied Sciences, Vilniaus kolegija / Higher Education Institution (VIKO), Instituto Politécnico de Beja (IPBeja), University College of Northern Denmark (UCN), and Halmstad University. In this constellation, international and interdisciplinary cooperation is not presented as an end in itself, but as the basis for coordinated project development with regional and societal relevance.

The POD's strategy is organized around two main focus areas. The first is healthcare and care systems, where digital transformation is linked to themes such as telemedicine, process automation, and data-driven quality improvement. The second is industrial applications, especially Industry 4.0 for SMEs, including smart production, logistics, predictive maintenance, and operational optimization. These are fields



in which digital technologies can create new possibilities, but only when they are connected to concrete institutional, professional, and regional needs.

To support this work, the POD identifies a set of enabling technologies. These include generative AI, which can help create adaptive content, support decisions, and generate simulation data; AR/VR and digital twins, which can be used for immersive learning, training, and virtual prototyping; operations research and optimization, which can improve scheduling, resource planning, and resilience modeling; machine learning and computer vision for real-time analytics, process monitoring, and anomaly detection; robotics and sensing for interaction, sensing, manipulation, and self-learning systems; and explainable and trustworthy AI, which emphasizes transparency, human involvement, and regulatory alignment. In the POD's framework, these technologies are not presented as isolated trends. They are tools to be applied in healthcare, care, manufacturing, and SME contexts where research competence and implementation need to go hand in hand.



Just as important, the strategy makes clear that digital transformation is not only about introducing technology. It is also about the conditions that make adoption responsible and sustainable. For that reason, the POD integrates three cross-cutting themes throughout its research agenda: data sovereignty and compliance, security and trust, and change management and skills development. This means that questions of local control over data, regulatory compliance, cybersecurity, trust in connected systems, and workforce preparation are treated as part of the research challenge itself, not as afterthoughts. That broad framing is one reason the POD can speak both to scientific expertise and to societal relevance.

The potential added value of this approach lies in its combination of European collaboration with regional application. In healthcare and care, the strategy points to topics such as AI-supported documentation, robotics in care, workflow planning and optimization, and sensor-supported care. In manufacturing and Industry 4.0, it highlights digital twins for production, operations-research-based planning, and automation in SMEs. At the same time, every applied research activity is intended to include a regional upskilling component. The strategy explicitly names lifelong learning formats such as training courses and micro-degrees, SMEs collaboration events such as workshops and conferences, and open educational resources that allow transnational reuse and scalability. It also foresees workshops, pilot courses, open resources, and regional demo labs that can serve as demonstrators for digital technologies and data-driven processes. These are not described as finished

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outcomes, but as mechanisms through which research knowledge can move into regional ecosystems.

What gives the POD particular strategic weight is its emphasis on continuity. The strategy does not stop at networking. From 2026 to 2028, it aims to build a sustainable European proposal pipeline with a target of two high-quality proposals per year. Its performance perspective is equally clear: progress is to be measured by the number of EU proposals submitted per year and the total funding volume acquired. In this sense, the POD is designed for implementation. Exchange becomes meaningful because it is tied to proposal development, submission rhythms, and a shared roadmap across several years.



The current implementation status shows that this process is already underway. Coordination is currently carried out by Dr. Armin Gerl and Prof. Florian Wahl. Regular status meetings have been established, minutes are created and shared, and the POD is currently working through two proposal working groups. One initiative addresses the call HORIZON-CL4-2026-02-DIGITAL-EMERGING-51 led by Ross Friel of Halmstad University. A second initiative is linked to HORIZON-CL4-2027-01-DIGITAL-EMERGING-52. These details matter because they show that the pod's strategy has already moved into an operational mode shaped by concrete calls, deadlines, and collaborative drafting work.

A particularly important step in this process was the in-person meeting held on 24 and 25 March 2026 in Deggendorf and Grafenau, Bavaria, Germany. Conceived as a focused brainstorming and research exchange format, the meeting served as more than a routine gathering. It provided a setting

in which current expertise was actively exchanged, including insights from existing submission work, while mid-term calls and funding opportunities were discussed and project ideas for the 2026/2027 academic year were developed through a dedicated process based on Design Thinking. Campus in Deggendorf and Campus Grafenau formed part of this format, linking discussion with the environments in which applied research and demonstration can take shape. In that sense, the meeting functioned as a concrete mechanism for turning international and interdisciplinary exchange into actionable project development.

Seen as a whole, the HEROES Digital Transformation POD offers a structured model for how a European university alliance can move from dialogue to development. It links scientific competence with practical application, combines technological ambition with attention to trust, compliance, and skills, and frames international collaboration as a means of building proposals, capacities, and regional relevance. Its promise is carefully defined, not overstated: not guaranteed impact, but the creation of a coherent framework through which healthcare, care, manufacturing, SME collaboration, open knowledge dissemination, demo labs, workshops, pilot courses, and educational resources can be developed in a sustained and collaborative way. For a broad public, that may be the most important point. In HEROES, digital transformation is being treated not as a slogan, but as a process that must be organized if it is to produce shared European projects with value beyond the university itself.

Florian Wahl, Armin Gerl and Ekaterina Mashina

3.1.5. Education, learning & inclusion

The **HEROES Research POD on Education, Learning and Inclusion** has, since its establishment, worked collaboratively across institutions and countries to build a shared thematic research agenda. The POD has met regularly online and is organised into several **sub-PODs**, each focusing on specific themes within education, inclusion, learning processes, and professional practice.

The POD on Education, Learning and Inclusion includes 61 researchers here at the beginning of 2026 participating in the 7 subpods named: *Professional identity/Teacher education/Lifelong learning, Inclusive education/Democratic citizenship, Math Science and STEAM, Disabilities studies, Early Childhood, Digital supported learning, Wellbeing*

Each subPOD is represented by 1-2 researchers, including a coordinator responsible for organizing bi-annual lunch meetings, including extraordinary meetings related to interests. All meeting activities are recorded, and decisions are documented in minutes. In total, 15 online meetings within the POD and subPODs have been held by the end of March 2026, and in addition, meetings focused on collaboration related to upcoming calls are ongoing.

Aalborg Thematic Brainstorm Retreat & Physical Meeting, 20–21 November 2025

1. Aalborg Thematic Brainstorm Retreat & Physical Meeting, 20–21 November 2025

The POD gathered for a two-day in-person retreat in Aalborg on 20–21 November 2025. The purpose of this retreat was to co-create a thematic research agenda through collaborative workshops, track-based discussions, and shared brainstorming activities.



Aalborg Thematic Brainstorm Retreat & Physical Meeting, 20–21 November 2025

Participants worked in two parallel tracks:

- **Track 1: Inclusion**, focusing on disability, neurodivergence, refugee inclusion, and labour market participation.
- **Track 2: Education & Learning**, addressing reflective practice, early childhood learning, STEAM/STREAM, and emerging challenges in teaching and learning.



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The retreat included thematic brainstorming sessions, lab and makerspace visits, social gathering and several presentations of current research themes. The work resulted in six concrete cross-institutional project ideas, each with committed partners and an initial funding strategy.

2. Upcoming Physical Meeting and Thematic Brainstorm Retreat: 7–8 May 2026

The network will meet again on the **7–8 May 2026**, where the focus will be to:

- Further develop and refine **research agendas** within each subpod.
- Advance the identified **project ideas**, including methodological development and partner roles.
- Visit relevant organisations and engage with professionals through presentations tailored to the pod's thematic areas.
- Align ongoing work with upcoming funding opportunities across Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Interreg, the Digital Europe Programme, and other relevant schemes.

3. Publications within the HEROES Alliance:

Heroes partner included: Halmstad University and UCN Research POD on Education, Learning and Inclusion

Jóhannesdóttir, S., Kousa, P., Korkala, S., Tarvainen, J., Björnsdóttir, K., Háhn, J., ... & Støckert, R. (2025, May). "Do As Your Teacher Tells You!" How Is AI Use Regulated in Nordic Higher Education Institutions?. In International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction (pp. 194-218). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. ["Do As Your Teacher Tells You!" How Is AI Use Regulated in Nordic Higher Education Institutions? | Springer Nature Link](#)

Brooks, E., Kaup, C. F., Dau, S., Edstrand, E., Granone, F., & Reikerås, E. K. L. (2025). Computational Play in Early Childhood: Integrating Analog and Digital Tools to Support Mathematical Learning and Computational Thinking. *Education Sciences*, 15(12), 1601. [Computational Play in Early Childhood: Integrating Analog and Digital Tools to Support Mathematical Learning and Computational Thinking](#)

4. Focus Areas and Emerging Project ideas

Based on the thematic work and the retreat outcomes, the POD is currently developing partnerships and project idea concepts within the following areas:

1) Shaping Professional Identity in the Era of LLMs and AI

Aim: How teachers' and students' professional identities are shaped in constant hybrid (physical/virtual) learning with LLMs and AI.

2) AI in Teaching and Learning Environments in Preprimary Education

Aim: Practical use of AI; implications/benefits; how AI changes learning in preprimary settings.

3) Inclusion, Teacher Self-efficacy & Neurodiversity (Student and Teacher tracks)

Aim (keywords): inclusion; teacher self-efficacy; neurodivergence/neurodiversity; stigmatisation/ stereotyping; social practices & context (insideout); group dynamics; teacher expectations.

4) Independent Living, Inclusion & Assistive Technologies

Aim: Support independent living across the life course for people with disabilities; societal & labour market inclusion; participatory and universal design; role of assistive technologies.

These project ideas are anchored by a broad consortium of partners from UCN, Fontys, Thomas More, VIKO, IPBeja, SeAMK, Halmstad University, and others—reflecting the pod's strong commitment to cross-national collaboration.

Next Steps

To maintain continuity and progress across the different sub-pods, regular online working sessions are planned. Each sub-group will continue to refine its aims, develop methodological frameworks, and explore relevant funding calls. Specific timelines are already in place, and additional opportunities will be mapped collectively as part of the pod's ongoing strategic work.

Susanne Dau

3.1.6. Regional development

This transversal POD creates expert networks in business/innovation ecosystems, innovative tourism, rural development and smart cities and communities. Our joint goal is to support the *development of resilient regions*. Resilience in regional development is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the ability of regions to adapt, innovate, and strategically reorganize in response to various shocks and disruptions.

Resilient regional development refers to the capacity of a region to continuously adapt, innovate, and transform in response to economic, technological, environmental, and societal challenges through strong collaboration between higher education institutions, industry, public authorities, and civil society. It is driven by knowledge-based innovation, entrepreneurial capacity, and durable ecosystem partnerships that enable sustainable growth, competitive diversification, and long-term societal impact.

The POD targets resilient regional development both from a rural perspective and from a smart cities and communities' perspective. It is important to address economic, social and environmental sustainability when targeting resilient regional development. Moreover, it is important with citizen and other stakeholders' engagement, for example through living labs and cross-sectoral collaborations.

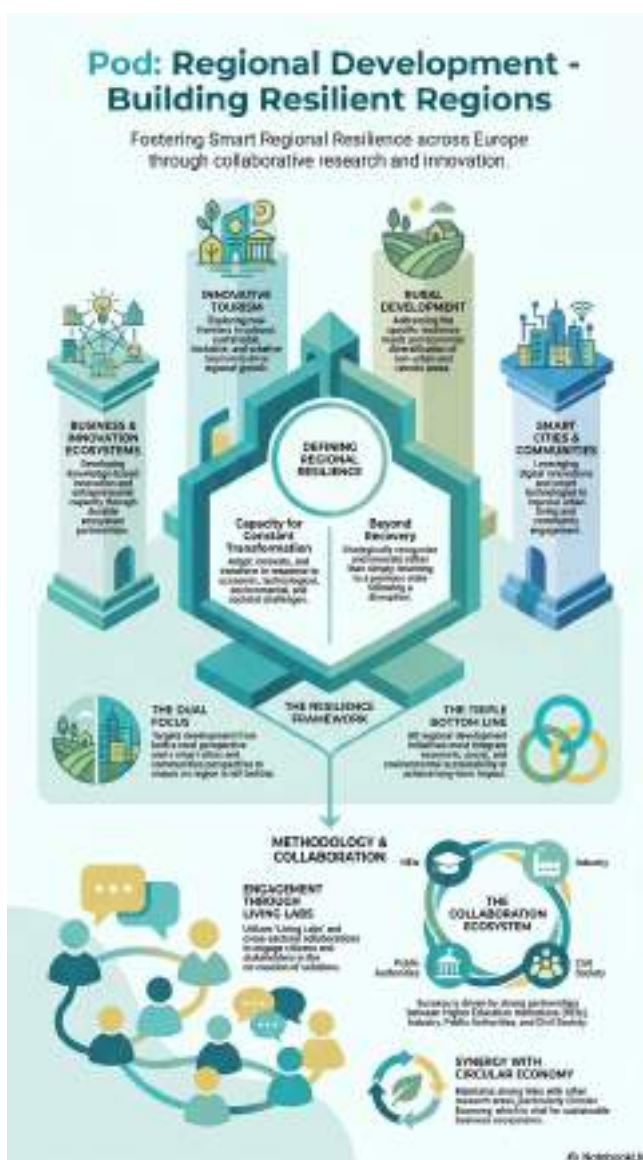
Several of the POD partners are specifically interested in innovative tourism. This includes, for example, cultural tourism, sustainable tourism, inclusive tourism, and the incorporation of creativity.

Since the scope of the POD is quite broad, there are many relations and potential synergy effects with the other PODs. Just as one example, circular economy is very relevant when investigating business/innovation ecosystems for the development of resilient regions.

Magnus Jonsson



Image generated by AI.



Infographic generated by NotebookLM.

4.1. Interview with Alina Katunian

The Researchers Were There. What Was Missing Was the Connective Tissue.

Dr. Alina Katunian, Head of the Research and Art Department at Vilnius kolegija, on what happens when you try to build a system around people who already have their own

With nineteen research fields, four arts disciplines, and a long history of international partnerships, Vilnius kolegija was not starting from scratch. So when the HEROES European University Alliance arrived with the promise of structured collaboration, the response was not universal enthusiasm. Some researchers asked a fair question: why do we need new partners when we already have our own? One year in, Dr. Alina Katunian reflects on that question — and on the answer that is slowly taking shape.

Your researchers had international networks before HEROES. What does the Alliance actually change?

Not the fact of collaboration — the logic of it. Our researchers had strong partnerships before, but those depended on individual initiative and personal contacts. That works, and it remains important. What HEROES adds is a standing partnership alongside those networks. One of the Alliance leaders once compared it to a marriage — a polygamous one, perhaps, but a reliable one. When you need a co-author, access to a laboratory, a partner for a Horizon Europe proposal, the Alliance is the first place you look. Not because anyone forbids other partnerships, but because the response is faster and the commitment is already there.

In theory, that sounds clean. What did the first year actually look like?

Honestly? Quite chaotic — but not in the way you might think. The proposals started coming, the connections were forming. The real challenge was internal: how do you layer a new structure on top of what already works without breaking it? Nearly all our researchers are also lecturers. Their time is split between teaching, research, and administration. Adding international coordination on top of that is not a small ask.



So we spent a significant part of the first year simply talking to people. We held meetings with faculty communities, explained what the Alliance could offer, listened to concerns. That groundwork was necessary. You cannot build a system if the people inside it do not see the value.

Once people were on board, you had to decide where to focus. So you looked at the six research PODs and decided to go for the full menu.

With nineteen research fields, we found that our work connects naturally to all six. Not equally — some groups have more of our researchers than others — but the connections are real, not forced.

What we did deliberately was shape our institutional research priorities for 2025–2029 so they move in the same direction as the HEROES agenda. We wanted the two to reinforce each other, not compete for researchers' time.

What we have learned is that the structure alone is not enough. Some groups develop their own dynamic quite



quickly — regular meetings, joint conference sessions, a shared rhythm. It is interesting to watch how a group builds its own energy once that momentum starts. Where that rhythm exists, people get more out of the collaboration. Where it is still forming, it takes longer, but the potential is there.

In the end, you cannot force researchers to collaborate. What you can do is lower the barriers and create the spaces where it can happen.

Can you give a concrete example of what this collaboration looks like in practice?

Take the proposal we coordinated with SeAMK in Finland — “Smart Agri Bioenergy,” an Erasmus+ project under the Agriculture and Food agenda. Before HEROES, putting together a consortium like that would have required finding the right person through personal contacts, negotiating roles, building trust. Within the Alliance, the contact points were already mapped. We knew who works on what, and they knew us. The proposal came together faster.

Or look at a Horizon Europe submission on AI-improved manufacturing processes, where Fontys coordinated and we joined alongside SeAMK and Halmstad. That is a very different thematic area, a very different funding instrument, a very different consortium — but the mechanism was the same. The infrastructure of knowing each other was already in place.

Beyond proposals, what other resources for researchers has the Alliance made more accessible?

Two things that matter practically. First, laboratories. We spent the first year cataloguing research equipment and capacities across all HEROES partners. The principle is simple: if you need a piece of equipment we do not have in Vilnius, you can arrange to use it in Seinäjoki, Deggendorf, or Beja. Bilateral agreements could do this before, in theory. But you had to negotiate each time. The Alliance makes it a standing arrangement.

Second, there is now internal seed funding — Small-Scale Cooperation Projects, around €9,000 per project. The amounts are modest. We will not reach scientific heights with that. But it gives researchers a reason to take the first

step, to actually sit down and plan something together instead of just talking about it.

In October 2026, you are hosting a BIP for researchers in Vilnius. What is the thinking behind it?

It comes from something we observed all year: genuine research collaboration happens face to face. You can maintain an existing relationship over Teams, but the chemistry that sparks a new idea, a new methodology, a joint paper — that tends to happen in the same room.

So we designed a programme that brings researchers and project managers to Vilnius for a week, working on real Horizon Europe proposal concepts for 2027 calls. Five specific topics, from sustainable cultural tourism to digital innovation in agriculture. The ambition is that people leave with proposals ready for submission, not just good intentions.

It is the first BIP of this kind in the Alliance, and more than half the 20 places are filled. We also learned a practical lesson in planning it: you have to announce these things a year in advance. If you are late, people want to come but their budgets are already allocated elsewhere.

If a researcher asks you today, “What does HEROES give me?” — what do you say?

I say what I have been saying in every faculty meeting: you will get out of it what you put in. HEROES is not a service that delivers results to your desk. It is an infrastructure. Partners who are ready to collaborate. Laboratories you can access. Calls that have been identified. Seed funding to get started. But none of it activates itself.

What I have seen in this first year is that the researchers, the expertise, the laboratories — all of it was already there, scattered across nine institutions in nine countries. What was missing was the connective tissue. The shared maps, the standing agreements, the mutual commitment that turns isolated capabilities into something you can actually use. That tissue is forming now. It is not finished, and it takes longer than anyone would like. But it is there.

Interview by Anna Aleknavičienė

4.2. Interview with João Dias

When Ancestral Tradition Meets Artificial Intelligence: Protecting the Legacy of Cheese Queijo Serpa PDO



Professor João Dias, from the Polytechnic University of Beja, is using cutting-edge technology to solve the shortage of specialized labor in traditional sectors.

The Alentejo region is famous for its artisanal products, but it faces a modern crisis: a dwindling population and a loss of the specialized knowledge passed down through generations. To address this, the Polytechnic University of Beja (IPBeja) partnered with the Serpa Cheese Producers Association to create something revolutionary. By applying Artificial Intelligence to the ancient art of cheesemaking, Professor João Dias and his team are finding ways to ensure that the “Alentejo” brand remains a hallmark of quality in a changing world.

Can you explain the core focus of this agri-food research and why it is so critical right now?

This project is a partnership between the Serpa Cheese Producers Association and IPBeja. The initiative actually came from the producers themselves, who identified the most pressing needs in artisanal cheese manufacturing.

Our research is completely innovative in Portugal: we are associating Artificial Intelligence with an ancestral production process. It was a new challenge for the Polytechnic to explore an area that had never been tested before, trying to make something entirely new grow from such traditional roots.

What are the specific challenges and opportunities you see for the agri-food sector in this region?

Our region has very unique characteristics. On the positive side, the “Alentejo” brand is a recognized and prestigious mark both inside and outside Portugal. However, we are facing conditions that didn’t exist two generations ago. In the past, the population was much larger, and knowledge was passed easily from parents to children. Today, dairies suffer from a chronic lack of specialized manual labor. This is where the opportunity lies: we are using technology to teach a system the subtle details that define a great cheese—details that usually take a human many years of experience to master.

How does applied research help bridge the gap between science and the real needs of companies and farmers?

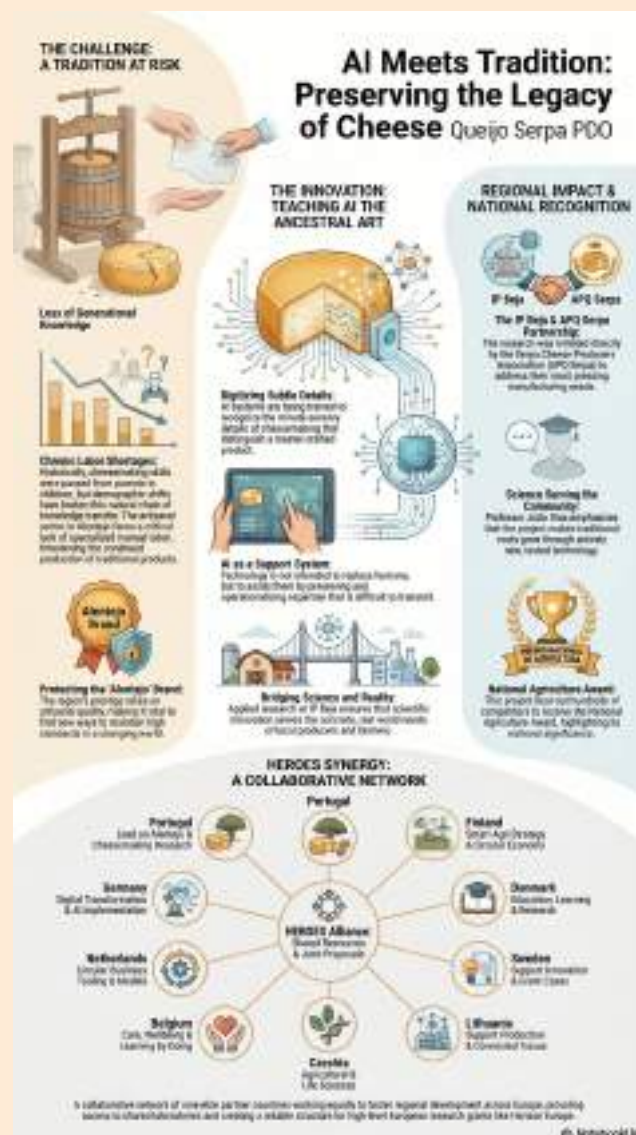
We are in a time of complete change and great dynamics. The entire agricultural sector is being reinvented. IPBeja has played a very active role in this transition by transferring knowledge across various domains. It is essential to first understand the specific weaknesses and strengths of each area of work. Our working groups then adapt and find new solutions based on those real-world needs, ensuring that science isn't just theoretical but serves the community.

In your opinion, how does the HEROES Alliance impact this kind of regional development?

The HEROES Alliance is a very pertinent partnership because it allows us to unite different universities and experiences under one single "hat." In my work with various work-packages, I've noticed that every partner has their own unique strengths and research areas. It makes perfect sense to join these synergies, bringing together the best of each university to perform even more active and impactful work for our communities.

Finally, could you tell us about the recent award your team received? We are very proud of the National Agriculture Award we received recently. There are hundreds of projects competing every year, so this recognition was something we didn't initially expect. It gives us a tremendous incentive to keep working—and, of course, it comes with an increased sense of responsibility to continue our research.

Interview by Ana Teresa Alves and Sara Albino



Infographic generated by NotebookLM.



5 | JOINT RESEARCH

5.1. Turning Ideas into Collaboration: HEROES Small-Scale Projects Call

The first Call for Small-Scale Cooperation Projects (2026), launched in March by the HEROES4REGIONS Joint Practice-Oriented Scientific Research Hub, is currently in its selection and evaluation phase.

Proposals will undergo institutional pre-selection and will be assessed at Alliance level by the WP5 Working Group Evaluation Committee. The final decision on the selected projects will be taken during the semi-annual HEROES meeting in Vilnius at the earliest.

The call supports small-scale, cross-institutional cooperation in practice-oriented research, innovation, knowledge transfer, and valorisation, contributing to Smart Regional Resilience. It is designed as a low-threshold opportunity for researchers and research support staff to initiate new collaborations with the potential to expand, engage with regional stakeholders, and explore innovative cooperation formats across the Alliance.

Projects are expected to contribute to one or more of the Alliance's priority areas: people's resilience, businesses' resilience, and nature's resilience.

The call provides seed funding of up to €9,000 for initiatives involving at least three HEROES partner institutions that engage relevant stakeholders, strengthen collaboration and capacity-building, and create potential for future joint projects or external funding. Selected projects will start in September 2026 and run for a maximum of nine months.

This first call marks an important step in strengthening collaboration across the HEROES Alliance and building a dynamic foundation for future joint initiatives.

More information:

<https://heroesuniversity.eu/news/heroes-small-scale-cooperation-projects/>
[Video of the call for Small-Scale Cooperation Projects \(2026\)](#)





5.2. From Ideas to Impact: A Blended Intensive Programme on Building Horizon Europe Proposals

In October 2026, Vilniaus kolegija will host *From Ideas to Impact: Building Horizon Europe Proposals Together*, a Blended Intensive Programme open to both researchers and project managers from across the HEROES Alliance and its associated partners.

The programme responds to a practical need that has emerged during the first year of HEROES. Researchers and project managers across the Alliance bring a wide range of expertise, access to research infrastructure, and a growing familiarity with each other's institutions. What is often missing is dedicated time to bring these elements together. By placing researchers and project managers in the same working groups, the BIP combines scientific expertise with proposal development and project management know-how — a combination that lies at the heart of any competitive Horizon Europe application.

The online opening session takes place on 26 May 2026, followed by an on-site week in Vilnius from 19 to 23 October 2026. The on-site programme is structured around the three pillars of a Horizon Europe proposal — Excellence, Impact, and Implementation — with training sessions in the mornings and group work in the afternoons. Five Horizon Europe topics from the 2027 calls have been selected as starting points, covering sustainable cultural tourism, culture and well-being, AI innovation, climate extremes, and digital innovations for resilient agriculture.

A week is not enough to write a finished proposal, and that is not what the BIP sets out to do. The realistic ambition is

to leave Vilnius with refined project concepts, committed partners, and a clear path forward — the foundations on which proposals can then be developed in the months that follow. Just as importantly, we hope the programme will spark new working relationships and strengthen cooperation between researchers and project managers across HEROES institutions, contributing to the Alliance's broader ambition of building a sustainable pipeline of joint research and innovation projects.

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6 | OVERVIEW OF THE NEXT ISSUE'S THEME

6.1. Call for Contributions – HEROES Focus Science Magazine, Issue 2 (November 2026)

How can regions become more sustainable, resilient, and resource-wise? How can research, innovation, and collaboration help reshape the way we produce, consume, reuse, and imagine the future?

The second issue of the HEROES Science Magazine invites contributors to explore these questions through the theme of **Circular Economy** — a field that is becoming increasingly central to regional transformation across Europe. More than an environmental priority, circular economy is a space of experimentation, applied research, entrepreneurial thinking, and collective action. It opens new possibilities for reducing waste, extending the life of materials, strengthening small and medium-sized enterprises, and creating more sustainable and inclusive regional futures.

Within the HEROES Alliance, circular economy is understood as a dynamic and interdisciplinary area of practice and research. It brings together sustainable entrepreneurship, circular business models, resource efficiency, digitalisation, innovation, and collaboration across institutions, sectors, and territories. It also speaks directly to the broader HEROES mission: supporting smart regional resilience through impactful research, challenge-based cooperation, and strong European partnerships rooted in local realities.

For this issue, we welcome contributions that show how circular economy is being researched, tested, discussed, and applied across the HEROES ecosystem and beyond. We are looking for texts that are accessible, engaging, and relevant to a wide readership, including researchers, students, stakeholders, policymakers, and readers outside academia.

Possible contributions may include collaborative research stories, case studies, project results, regional initiatives, policy reflections, innovation in SMEs, education and skills for circular transition, research-led capacitation BIPs, or overviews of POD conferences, seminars, and related activities. We are especially interested in contributions that

combine scientific insight with concrete examples, real experiences, and a forward-looking perspective.

This issue aims to create a shared space for ideas, stories, and practices that can inspire new connections and support Europe's transition towards more circular, innovative, and resilient regions.

Please send your contributions to:

cristina.santos@ipbeja.pt

sara.albino@ipbeja.pt

Contributor guidelines:

Available on the HEROES website

<https://heroesuniversity.eu/>



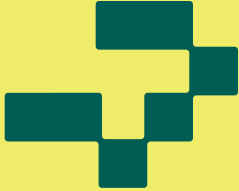


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