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NEOLAiA

Transforming Regions for an Inclusive Europe

WORK PACKAGE 5

Increasing the impact of regional research

Deliverable 5.3

Intermediate Report on High-Quality Research with Regional Impact

December 2025

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1 Used terms and abbreviations

AI – Artificial Intelligence

BRIDGE – “Brain response to pollution: novel insights from genetic, environmental and lifestyle pathways”

Title of a research proposal

CoR-Lab – CoR-Lab (robotics and cognition laboratory at Bielefeld University)

CV – Curriculum Vitae

D5.3 – Deliverable 5.3

ERASMUS-EDU-2024-PEX-TEACH-ACA – ERASMUS-EDU-2024-PEX-TEACH-ACA

Erasmus+ call identifier for a Teachers’ Academies project

ESR – Early-Stage Researcher

EUR – Euro

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

HORIZON-CL2-2025-01-DEMOCRACY-09 – HORIZON-CL2-2025-01-DEMOCRACY-09 Horizon Europe Cluster 2 (Culture, Creativity & Inclusive Society) 2025 call topic on democracy

HORIZON-HLTH-2025-03-ENVHLTH-01 – HORIZON-HLTH-2025-03-ENVHLTH-01 Horizon Europe Health 2025 call topic on environmental health

HRS4R – Human Resources Strategy for Researchers

IAE – School of Management at the University of Tours (mentioned as initiating a cooperation initiative; not linguistically expanded in the document)

IoT – Internet of Things

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning

M18 – Month 18

M36 – Month 36

MANSiD – Integrated Center for Research, Development and Innovation in Advanced Materials, Nanotechnologies, and Distributed Systems for Fabrication and Control

MISSI_GEN – “Generating Mis(sing) Information on Gender and LGBTQ+”

NEOLAIa – The NEOLAIa European Universities Alliance

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organisations

NRF – NEOLAIa Research Framework

OER – Open Educational Resources

OPM – Overall Project Manager

ORU – Örebro University

OU – University of Ostrava

PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

SICRAM – Research on rare earth recycling with 14 industrial partners at University of Jaén



SVAKO – *Šiauliai State University of Applied Sciences*

T5.1 – *Task 5.1 Developing the NEOLAIa Research Framework*

T5.2 – *Task 5.2 Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*

T5.3 – *Task 5.3 Creating NEOLAIa Expert Support Teams*

T5.4 – *Task 5.4 Increasing NEOLAIa research funding and capacity (wording slightly condensed)*

T5.5 – *Task 5.5 Launching the NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme*

UJA – *University of Jaén*

UN – *United Nations*

UNIBI – *Bielefeld University*

UNIC – *University of Nicosia*

UNISA – *University of Salerno*

USV – *“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava*

UT – *University of Tours*

WP1 – Project Management

WP2 – Improving Teaching and Learning

WP3 – Diversity and inclusion - overcoming barriers to participation

WP4 – Enhanced Mobility

WP5 – Increasing Regional Research Impact

WP6 – Entrepreneurship - Capacities for the society of tomorrow

WP7 – Towards a multilingual and intercultural European university

WP8 – Adoption and maintenance of Open Science

WP9 – Digital Transformation

WP10 – Sustainability and dissemination

WPD – Work Package Delegate

2 List of tables

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5. Number of mentees ESR Mentorship Programme
6. ESR Seminars
7. Existing Living Labs and Collaborative platforms within the Alliance

3 Introduction

NEOLAIa, with its slogan 'Transforming Regions for an Inclusive Europe', is an Alliance of nine European Universities co-funded by the European Commission in its 2023 call for the period 2024-2027. The aim of NEOLAIa is to transform regional connectivity by embracing (i) digital transformation, through (ii) inclusion and diversity in a context of (iii) enhanced mobility, which are the three pillars of the project. To achieve this end, the work of NEOLAIa is being organised around ten lines of action, or Work-Packages (WPs):

- WP1 Project Management.
- WP2 Improving Teaching and Learning.
- WP3 Diversity and inclusion - overcoming barriers to participation.
- WP4 Enhanced Mobility.
- WP5 Increasing Regional Research Impact.
- WP6 Entrepreneurship - Capacities for the society of tomorrow.
- WP7 Towards a multilingual and intercultural European university.
- WP8 Adoption and maintenance of Open Science.
- WP9 Digital Transformation.
- WP10 Sustainability and dissemination.

The NEOLAIa partners are: University of Jaén, Örebro University, Bielefeld University, University of Ostrava, University of Nicosia, Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, University of Tours, University of Salerno, and Šiauliai State University of Applied Sciences.

WP5, titled "Increasing Regional Research Impact," focuses on strengthening research with regional impact within the NEOLAIa Alliance. Recognising the importance of research alongside teaching and societal engagement, NEOLAIa is dedicated to addressing regional needs and supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This includes enhancing education and societal frameworks by utilising expertise in areas like Global Health, Inclusion and Diversity, and Digitalisation.

NEOLAIa's strategy involves forming expert teams to support academic growth and prevent regional brain drain, thus promoting regional development. The Research Strategy boosts the quality and relevance of research by aiding Early-Stage Researchers through mobility, training, and mentorship, fostering successful research networks.

The Alliance encourages the formation of cross-border research teams, enhancing academic efforts that meet regional societal demands. It also promotes international research collaboration through the NEOLAIa Research Framework (NRF), facilitating the exchange of research resources among universities.

Additionally, NEOLAIa is developing platforms like the NEOLAIa Living Lab and Open Science for collaborative knowledge creation, directly addressing regional needs and engaging the surrounding society. Ultimately, NEOLAIa aims to drive regional growth by fostering cross-border cooperation and tackling societal challenges with an inclusive, sharing-based approach.



These are the aims of WP5:

- To encourage NEOLAIa partners' research groups and centres to form new multidisciplinary and transnational research teams and projects, in order to produce substantial and high-impact research addressing societal challenges of regional relevance. This will be supported by the launch of the NEOLAIa Research Framework (NRF), containing principles for sharing research resources in an efficient, sustainable and quality-enhancing manner (T5.1).
- To support inclusive research of regional relevance by mapping and sharing infrastructure of the NEOLAIa universities' (e.g. technical equipment, databases, cohorts, staff, regional collaborative networks, and living/social/impact labs) and identifying research synergies as a basis for forming transnational research teams (T5.2).
- Create Expert Support Teams specialised in academic career development and general research support to strengthen academic collaborations and prevent brain-drain of researcher out of our regions (T5.3).
- Offer targeted activities for Early-Stage Researchers and create opportunities to form transnational research projects and networks through mobility and mentoring, thus providing enhanced quality and regional relevance of NEOLAIa research (T5.4).
- To create the NEOLAIa Living Lab Hub to provide open platforms for co-creation of knowledge with stakeholders, resulting in innovative and regionally relevant high-impact research linked to societal needs (T5.5).

4 Executive summary/abstract

This intermediate report (D5.3) presents progress in NEOLAIa's Work Package 5 (WP5), which aims to build a collaborative, excellent, and regionally grounded research ecosystem across the Alliance. Drawing on a mapping of research strengths aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), NEOLAIa has identified areas of critical mass, such as Global Health, Inclusion and Diversity, and Digital Infrastructures, and advanced a Smart Regionalisation Strategy that connects complementary profiles, avoids duplication, and enhances societal impact.

Implementation is structured through five mutually reinforcing strands. The NEOLAIa Research Framework (NRF) has been adopted in a revised form by all partner universities, with strategic embedding under way and the associated KPI expected to be met. Seed funding schemes, using both existing institutional instruments and NEOLAIa-branded calls, have enabled first rounds of mobility, networking, and proposal development, with two universities already meeting their targets and others preparing dedicated programmes. Comprehensive mapping of research infrastructures, expertise, and collaborations is in progress, though technical, GDPR-related, and data-quality issues have slowed full-scale deployment. Expert Research Support Teams and the HRS4R Team now provide shared capacity in data management, doctoral support, scientific communication, and research HR, with the HRS4R Key Performance Indicator (KPI) already achieved and 34 mobility exchanges recorded. For Early-Stage Researchers (ESRs), a seminar series and a cross-Alliance mentorship programme currently support 14 mentees and have delivered eight seminars, placing the KPIs on track. The Living Lab Programme has established its conceptual and organisational foundations, with existing labs mapped and the first joint activities launched, although formal Living Lab Hubs involving multiple universities and regional stakeholders are still in preparation.

Overall, NEOLAIa has laid robust foundations for high-quality, inclusive, and regionally impactful research but must now address identified bottlenecks, particularly uneven engagement, technical integration of mapping tools, and mentor recruitment, while accelerating KPI delivery, activating Living Lab Hubs, and preparing the updated NRF due in December 2026.

5 Report Introduction

This document constitutes Deliverable D5.3, *Intermediate report on high-quality research with regional impact*, within NEOLAIa's Work Package 5 (*Increasing Regional Research Impact*, WP5). Research stands alongside *Teaching* and *Societal Engagement* as NEOLAIa's three core missions as a European University (Grant Agreement p. 8). Rather than pursuing volumes of publications as a goal in itself, NEOLAIa positions the Alliance as an enabler of high-quality research with regional specialisation, translating existing strengths into outcomes that matter for our regions and their stakeholders. In line with the mission, this deliverable reports on progress in building a research ecosystem that is excellent, collaborative and, crucially, regionally relevant up until the end of October 2025.

The report is grounded in NEOLAIa's mapping of research strengths and their alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), informed by the Alliance's bibliometric and specialisation index analysis. This analysis confirms areas of critical mass across partners, including Global Health, Curbing Inequalities, Inclusion and Diversity, and Digitalisation Infrastructures, among others, where the Alliance can catalyse impact through coordinated action. Building on these insights, NEOLAIa advances a Smart Regionalisation Strategy: leveraging distinctive profiles across our universities to connect capabilities, avoiding duplication, and create transfer opportunities that are genuinely valuable for civil society, public bodies, and communities in the participating regions.

WP5 operationalises this vision through a set of mutually reinforcing tasks. Its aim is to facilitate access to a comprehensive account of synergies across partners' research groups and centres, helping to seed fund new transnational teams and projects capable of delivering high impact, meaningful research on regionally salient societal challenges (T5.1, *Developing a NEOLAIa Research Framework*). In parallel, the NEOLAIa Research Framework (NRF) is being launched to set out principles for efficient, sustainable, and quality-enhancing sharing of research resources, enabled by digitalisation, to strengthen research quality and applicability across the Alliance (T5.1, *Developing a NEOLAIa Research Framework*). To support inclusion and regional relevance on a scale, we are establishing a detailed, shareable mapping of infrastructure and resources, technical equipment, databases, cohorts, staff expertise, regional collaborative networks, and living/social/impact labs, so that assets can be accessed across universities (T5.2, *Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*). Dedicated expert support teams are being created to professionalise guidance on external research funding, academic career development, and general research support, thereby deepening regional engagement and mitigating researcher brain drain (T5.3, *Creating NEOLAIa Expert Support Teams*). Early-Stage Researchers (ESR) are a priority: targeted mobility, mentoring, and network-building activities aim to accelerate their participation in successful transnational projects with clear regional impact (T5.4, *Designing actions for NEOLAIa High-Impact Research*). Finally, dynamic hubs for co-creation, through the NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme and in connection with Work Package 8 *Adopting and Sustaining Open Science* (WP8), are being constructed to connect researchers and stakeholders in the joint generation of knowledge and innovation that responds to concrete regional needs (T5.5, *Launching the NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme*).



As an intermediate deliverable, D5.3 provides:

- i. a synthesis of achievements and lessons learned thus far against WP5 objectives
- ii. an overview of the emerging synergy landscape and early examples of new teams and proposals
- iii. the current state of the NRF and the shared infrastructure/resource map
- iv. progress in establishing expert support teams and the services they provide
- v. outcomes of ESR focused actions in terms of mobility, mentoring, and network growth
- vi. initial operation of Living Labs and open co-creation platforms.

This report is intended for NEOLAIa governance bodies, research leaders, and professional services across partner institutions; ESRs; regional stakeholders from industry, public authorities, and civil society; and European policy actors with an interest in models of place-sensitive excellence. By consolidating evidence of progress, clarifying standards and processes for collaboration, and identifying actionable next steps, D5.3 is designed to inform decision making and resource allocation for the remainder of WP5 and to strengthen NEOLAIa's contribution to a resilient, inclusive, and innovation driven European Research Area.

6 NEOLAiA Research Framework

The NRF provides a shared, Alliance-wide structure for building long-term, interdisciplinary and regionally relevant research (project period 2024–2027). It is grounded in academic freedom and institutional autonomy, research ethics and integrity, diversity and inclusion, open science, environmental sustainability and digital innovation, mobility, and support for ESRs. Aligned with NEOLAiA's pillars – digital transformation, diversity & inclusion, and enhanced mobility – the NRF is implemented through shared resources, expert support teams, targeted ESR actions, and co-creation with regional stakeholders via the Living Lab Hub. Version 1 was due on 30 June 2025 (M18), with an update scheduled for 31 December 2026 (M36). The NRF will be available in all official languages of the Alliance's Institutions.

The NRF establishes the common foundations for how research is conceived, conducted, and supported across the Alliance. Through the NRF, all member universities demonstrate and organise their collective commitment to collaborative research and to the professional ecosystems that enable it (research support services, expert teams, and staff development).

The NRF was discussed extensively within WP5, particularly regarding the wording on institutional anchoring at each partner university. The version initially submitted included language that did not achieve full consensus among all universities; however, the milestone was approved by the Overall Project Manager (OPM). Further discussions continued over the summer of 2025, resulting in the adoption of revised wording in September 2025, which was formally accepted by all partner universities.

This revised version represents the final iteration approved by WP5. The NRF will, however, remain subject to further modifications and deliberations in connection with the upcoming update due on 31 December 2026.

A KPI is linked to the NRF, requiring a minimum of one strategic document per partner institution demonstrating commitment to the NEOLAiA Research Framework. Currently, one university has successfully integrated the NRF into a strategic document and three others are in the process of doing so. It is anticipated that the KPI will be achieved within the project timeframe.

7 Seed funding

In line with the NRF's purpose, the Alliance has used a mix of seed funding forms to catalyse new teams and ideas:

- **Mobility grants:** Short visits ("contact travel") for researchers and research support staff to meet prospective partners, scope joint work, and plan proposals; includes virtual/hybrid meeting support where appropriate.
- **Workshop/conferences/seminars:** Support for Alliance wide workshops, conferences and seminars.
- **Thematic collaborative networks:** Support for exchange of best practices, sharing of information, data, analysis on specific topics and capacity building.
- **Visiting Researcher programme:** Support for a mobility period for an Alliance researcher at a host university.

Several approaches have been used by NEOLAIa universities to channel seed funding in line with the NRF's goals of fostering collaborative and regionally relevant research. Some partners have relied on existing institutional programmes, such as long-standing university research funds or faculty-level innovation schemes, which enabled rapid allocation of resources and ensured continuity with established procedures. Others have launched dedicated NEOLAIa-branded calls, specifically designed to reflect the NRF's guiding principles of interdisciplinarity, regional relevance, open science, inclusion and support for ESRs.

One member university has applied for specific external funding from national or regional agencies to underwrite these seed activities. Others relied on internal resources, including central university budgets, faculty co-funding, or reinvested overheads, as mentioned above.

In practice, much of this seed funding has been allocated mobility within the Alliance, enabling researchers and research support staff to meet in person, visit each other's laboratories, exchange ideas, and co-develop funding proposals, thereby laying the foundation for more substantial collaborative research initiatives.

The KPI associated with this task stipulates that each university shall provide seed funding for at least five projects during the project period, resulting in a total of 45 seed-funded projects across the Alliance. The current status is as follows:

Seed Funded Projects (table 1)									
UJA	ORU	OU	UT	UNIBI	UNIC	UNISA	SVAKO	USV	Total
0	12	0	16	0	0	0	0	6	34

It can be concluded that three partner universities have achieved their designated KPI targets. The

absence of seed funding distribution by other institutions does not reflect a lack of institutional commitment; rather, universities have adopted differentiated approaches to seed funding mechanisms.

Örebro University (ORU) has utilised pre-existing financial resources administered by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for International Affairs, allocating EUR 20,000 annually to seed funding activities. Furthermore, the institution has introduced a simplified application procedure for travel support not exceeding EUR 1,000.

The University of Tours (UT) has successfully obtained external funding from the National Agency for Research, which has been designated for seed funding initiatives. The pre-existing scheme, *Bourse Rabelaisienne*, has also been used to support PhD projects.

Bielefeld University (UNIBI) provides an annual budget of €20,000 in institutional funds to support Seed Funding initiatives. Specifically, researchers preparing an external funding proposal in the field of research, whose consortium meaningfully involves at least one NEOLAIa partner, are eligible to apply for financial support. The funding can be used for proposal-related activities such as meetings, networking visits, workshops, short research stays, or joint project development sessions. So far, UNIBI has received expressions of interest but no formal applications. Promotion of the seed funding will therefore be intensified.

The University of Salerno (UNISA) has set aside a budget and will issue a seed funding programme end of 2025 or beginning of 2026.

The University of Nicosia (UNIC) has approved the provision of internal funding for the WP5 seed funding programme, with the final amount yet to be confirmed. It is expected that a budget will be decided and allocated in late 2025 or early 2026.

University of Suceava (USV) has funded six projects with a total value of approximately €40,000 (200,000 Lei) over a two-year period. Each project includes at least one research mobility period at a NEOLAIa partner university.

Finally, the other universities have planned for different calls when it comes to this task, and these will be issued during 2026. Consequently, the overall assessment is that the Alliance will reach this KPI by the end of the project.

8 Mapping activities

Task 5.2 (*Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*) plays a central role in building the evidence base for the NRF (T5.1, *Developing a NEOLAIa Research Framework*) and supports the activities of T5.3 (*Creating NEOLAIa Expert Support Teams*), T5.4 (*Designing actions for NEOLAIa High-Impact Research*) and T5.5 (*Launching the NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme*) by identifying and pooling research capacities across the Alliance. The task focuses on a comprehensive mapping of research activities, infrastructures, and human resources at all NEOLAIa universities. By doing so, it leverages each partner's unique strengths to achieve research outcomes that individual regional universities would be less able to accomplish alone.

This mapping extends and deepens earlier mappings from 2021-2022, coarse-grained analyses of research resources and synergies. It aims to identify opportunities for sharing specialised and often costly resources, such as technical equipment, databases, cohorts, regional collaborative networks, living, social and impact labs, research facilities, and public-facing platforms for outreach and dissemination.

To catalyse these synergies, formative meetings, thematic seminars, and joint conferences are supposed to be organised to bring together researchers, support staff and stakeholders, enabling them to identify shared priorities and design innovative joint projects. This process is expected to result in the formation of new NEOLAIa-based research teams, capable of producing highly applicable and regionally relevant research that advances the Alliance's long-term vision of high-impact, inclusive research linked to societal needs and regional development.

The mappings have been available through a NEOLAIa Teams shared map for WP5 Delegates since the end of 2024 but have not yet been disseminated through a fully open system that can be directly used by all researchers in the NEOLAIa Alliance. To our understanding some of the WP5 Delegates have used and shared information in the mappings, while others have not. In November 2025, a special folder was created in the NEOLAIa Teams to make the mappings easier to access for all researchers within the Alliance. The WPDs were encouraged to share the information about this folder.

Present work concentrates on the technical implementation and organisational framework for research information, including research centers, groups, strategic profiles, and infrastructure, compiled from all NEOLAIa partners. The primary objective is to integrate these mapping tools into the NEOLAIa homepage, which operates under Work Package 10 (*Sustainability and Dissemination*) responsibility.

This undertaking has presented, and continues to present, several challenges. The feasibility of transferring the mapping data from ORU (the lead institution) to the hosting system at Šiauliai State University of Applied Sciences (SVAKO) requires thorough assessment. Furthermore, continued discussions are necessary to establish a common agreement among Alliance members regarding data processing in accordance with GDPR requirements.

Disparities in information quality threaten the efficacy and usability of the mapping tools, potentially hindering researchers' ability to identify collaborative partners, access infrastructure facilities, and pursue joint funding applications, pilot studies, student exchanges, and related collaborative initiatives.

Addressing these quality assurance concerns is therefore paramount to ensuring the functionality and strategic value of the research mapping infrastructure.

Moreover, it is important to initiate activities to inform the NEOLAIa researchers about the mapping and its potential in various ways, not solely through a database accessible to all Alliance members. WP5 has identified that active work with disseminating the mappings through workshops and seminars will be necessary to fully use the potential of this information to support new research collaborations between the partner universities. This will be included in upcoming work by T5.2 (*Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*).

This task is associated with two KPIs. The first KPI targets the sharing of ten research resources among NEOLAIa partners, which may encompass datasets, laboratory equipment, and other essential research resources. Due to the nature of T5.2 (*Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*) and the considerations related to publishing the mappings, the shared resources identified so far remain limited. At this stage, we have therefore chosen a cautious and proportionate approach and have not yet quantified shared resources directly attributable to the mappings. Nevertheless, we are confident that the mappings have already played an important enabling role in supporting progress toward achieving this KPI. However, it can reasonably be assumed that once the mappings are more openly available, and alongside other measures such as informational webinars and additional communication, it is likely that the KPI will be achievable.

The second KPI is to reach 10 new collaborations based on the synergy map. Following are the reported as collaborations by the WP5 Delegates:

Name (table 2)	Represented universities	Information
NEOLAIa Medicine and Health Network	Representation of all NEOLAIa partner universities	A collaborative initiative that brings together the partner institutions' faculties, research groups, and health science centres with the aim of advancing education, research, and practice in medicine and health. The network was launched in 2022 and has since held meetings in Örebro, Nicosia, and Tours, as well as three online sessions. Most recently, the core group met to plan an upcoming event at USV in Spring 2026.
Research Group: Miss(ing) Information	UNIBI, OU, USV, SVAKO, ORU, UNIC, and University of Sumy (associated partner)	Workshops have been held as well as a conference 9-10 December 2025 in Örebro.

Cooperation initiative by the IAE (UT school of management) at UT to establish a management-sciences researcher network within the NEOLAIa Alliance	UT, UJA, SVAKO and USV	Seed funding from UT (Fonds de soutien aux collaborations de recherche NEOLAIa); 1st workshop 2–3 March 2026 at UT
Proposal: BRIDGE – “Brain response to pollution: novel insights from genetic, environmental and lifestyle pathways”	UNIBI and OU	HORIZON-HLTH-2025-03-ENVHLTH-01, deadline 16 September 2025
Proposal: MISSI_GEN – “Generating Mis(sing) Information on Gender and LGBTQ+”	ORU, UJA and UNISA	HORIZON-CL2-2025-01-DEMOCRACY-09, deadline 16 September 2025
Project: Inclusive Digital Education and Teacher Empowerment Academy	UNIBI and USV	ERASMUS-EDU-2024-PEX-TEACH-ACA, period 01 April 2025–31 March 2028; coordinated by USV
Research Group: NEOLAIa Law Network	UNIBI, UJA, UT, USV UNISA, UNIC, ORU, and University of Sumy (associate partner)	First Conference held May 2025 at ORU.

The extent to which all of these collaborations can be directly attributed to the mappings may be subject to interpretation. While the Medicine and Health Network was established prior to the start of the project and therefore cannot formally be counted toward the KPI at that stage, the planned re-launch of the network with a substantially renewed approach provides a strong basis for considering it, from that point onward, as a new collaboration linked to the synergy mapping. The other collaborations can in different ways be connected to the synergy mapping as they were reported by the WP5 Delegates. In our opinion, the KPI will nevertheless be reached, even if the currently reported collaborations do not all qualify under the strict KPI definition.

Finally, an online Open Research Hub (<https://data.neolaiacampus.eu/research-hub/>) has been created as an add on to the EU financed project. The Open Research Hub has up to date over 800 researchers listed on voluntarily basis and is search able for the purpose of promoting increased collaboration between researchers within NEOLAIa.

9 Building Expert Research Support Teams

Task 5.3 (*Creating NEOLAIa Expert Support Teams*) builds on the mapping of research resources and synergies in T5.2 (*Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*) to provide the organisational basis for long-term research development and sustainability. By prioritising regionality, diversity, inclusion, and gender equality, it establishes a research support ecosystem that connects staff in support roles across all partner universities. In response to institutional differences, the original idea of a single team was refined into three specialised units focusing on data management, doctoral studies, and scientific communication. Drawing on T5.2 (*Mapping NEOLAIa research resources and synergies*), these teams identify joint opportunities, organise seminars and workshops, and meet regularly, online and on-site, including a joint seminar at ORU in May 2025, covering topics such as cotutelle and joint supervision, research data management, digital tools, internal communication, and generative AI in science communication, while also supporting NEOLAIa research networks.

Complementing these teams, the HRS4R Team addresses the link between research quality and sustainable academic careers. It brings together universities that hold the HRS4R award with those preparing applications, fostering experience exchange and alignment with the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct. Through regular remote meetings and an on-site seminar at the UT, the team has focused on mentoring, communication strategies, monitoring progress, and improving support for incoming international researchers and their families to mitigate researcher brain drain and enhance regional competitiveness.

Together, the specialised Research Expert Support Teams and the HRS4R Team form a coherent, multi-dimensional support ecosystem that pools expertise, harmonises policies, and equips NEOLAIa researchers with the conditions needed to produce high-quality, inclusive, and regionally embedded research aligned with the NRF.

Two KPIs are associated with this task. The first stipulates that six NEOLAIa universities should hold the HRS4R award or be actively pursuing accreditation. The current status of this KPI is as follows:

HRS4R Status (table 3)								
UJA	ORU	OU	UT	UNIBI	UNIC	UNISA	SVAKO	USV
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing	Yes

It can be concluded that five universities already hold the HRS4R award and three are in the process of obtaining accreditation. Consequently, this KPI has been met.

The remaining KPI requires 60 mobility exchanges to be undertaken by research support staff across the

Alliance partnership. Progress towards achieving this target is as follows:

Research Staff Mobility (table 4)								
UJA	ORU	OU	UT	UNIBI	UNIC	UNISA	SVAKO	USV
0	4	7	4	4	4	5	2	4

A total of 34 mobilities have been recorded. It can therefore be anticipated that this KPI will be achieved during the project period.

10 Early-Stage Researchers

Task 5.4 (*Designing actions for NEOLAIa High-Impact Research*) focuses on strengthening the skills, opportunities, and career development of researchers across the NEOLAIa Alliance. By building on each university's distinctive research strengths and regional engagement, the task promotes transnational collaboration that enhances the quality, visibility, and societal impact of Alliance research. It also enables smaller universities to benefit from the expertise of stronger partners, fostering an inclusive, diverse, and sustainable research ecosystem.

The objective is to increase research capacity in NEOLAIa's high-impact areas leading to greater external funding, higher publication output in peer-reviewed journals, wider regional application of innovative methods and findings, and the creation of flexible academic careers attractive to both academic and non-academic sectors.

A key component is the NEOLAIa ESR Seminar Series, which promotes research excellence from a regional and intercultural perspective. Delivered digitally, the seminars cover essential topics such as publishing strategies, open data, funding, ethics, science communication, outreach, and career planning. They also develop transferable skills in proposal writing, CV preparation, leadership, pedagogy, and innovation, aligning closely with Work Package 7's plurilingual and intercultural objectives.

Complementing this, the NEOLAIa ESR Mentorship Programme supports PhD students and postdoctoral researchers by expanding professional networks and offering tailored career guidance across and beyond academia. It is supposed that two ESR Mentorships Programmes should be launched during the project period.

Mentees are matched with mentors from other NEOLAIa universities, associate partners, or regional organisations, ensuring access to diverse expertise and perspectives. While primarily conducted online, the programme includes at least one in-person activity to deepen collaboration.

Launched in early 2025, the first ESR Mentorship Programme includes fourteen mentees representing all NEOLAIa universities except one, which will host two participants in the next intake to ensure full coverage. To date, six mentorship workshops and four ESR seminars have been delivered, coordinated by an ESR Team of three senior researchers and one doctoral candidate. A key challenge has been securing sufficient mentors across disciplines and regions, an area identified as a priority for future cycles. One way to address this issue is to emphasise the general value of mentorship, while ensuring that mentees understand that the mentor may not work in exactly the same scientific field.

Collectively, these initiatives provide ESRs with structured guidance, cross-institutional networks, and clearer career pathways, while offering senior academics opportunities to refine supervision, strengthen collaborations, and engage with emerging research talent. Together, they reinforce NEOLAIa's commitment to high-quality, inclusive, and regionally anchored research.

The following ESRs are participating in the first ESR Mentorship Programme:

University (table 5)	Number of Mentees	Summary of Research Topics
UT	2	Marketing & management sciences Modern history
UNISA	2	Education IoT
OU	1	Mathematics
UNIBI	2	Sociology & climate discourse Literature
ORU	1	Health Care
SVAKO	2	Digital inclusion & public service collaboration Material science
UJA	1	English literature
UNISA	3	Political science Pharmacy Architecture
USV	0	

It can be concluded that the total number of mentees is 14. The KPI associated with this is that two mentees from each partner university should be enrolled across the two ESR Mentorship Programmes. In this respect, five universities have already met the KPI, three are on track, and one is in the process of doing so. Overall, it is anticipated that this KPI will be achieved.

However, it should be noted that there have been problems recruiting mentors for the programme. One contributing factor is the absence of formally allocated time for mentors to undertake the expected

activities. This refers to workload allocation rather than financial compensation. Another reason is difficulties in matching competencies when mentees have specified particular requests. Against that background, it becomes central that upcoming mentorship programmes focus on mentoring in general. Such a measure is likely to greatly facilitate the matching process.

The second KPI connected to the ESR Programme is to deliver 12 ESR seminars. Currently, the status is as follows:

ESR Seminars (table 6)								
UJA	ORU	OU	UT	UNIBI	UNIC	UNISA	SVAKO	USV
0	0	3	0	4	0	1	0	0

In total 8 ESR seminars have been reported by the member universities. Based on this, the project is well in line to meet this KPI.

11 Living Lab Hub

The NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme will create an open, regional, and inclusive platform connecting universities, industry, public authorities, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and civil society to identify challenges, co-produce research, and share solutions. Grounded in citizen science, responsible research and innovation, and Open Data/Open Science, it enhances the real-world impact of research while addressing regional needs. The initiative supports the UN 2030 Agenda and SDGs, particularly Goals 3, 4, 5, 10, and 16, focusing on Global Health and NEOLAIa's core pillars.

Within the NEOLAIa framework, a Living Lab Hub is defined as a collaboration involving at least two NEOLAIa universities and at least one external regional stakeholder. To coordinate these efforts, the NEOLAIa Living Lab Hub acts as a forum for exchange and a joint project incubator, bringing together specialists, institutional representatives, and regional stakeholders. It organises on-site seminars and online workshops to share best practices, with materials made publicly available as Open Educational Resources.

Launched in September 2024 with an inaugural workshop and followed by a seminar at the University of Tours, the programme began mapping existing Living Labs and participatory initiatives, identifying synergies and establishing a shared methodological foundation. A series of co-design sessions in early 2025 resulted in the strategic document *"The NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme: Purpose, Principles and Development"*, which defines the Hub as an adaptive framework for collaborative, sustainable, and regionally focused research across the Alliance.

Upcoming activities include workshops in 2025–2027 to refine cooperation areas and develop tools such as a synergy matrix and ecosystem mapping. A dedicated webpage will showcase the network, resources, and opportunities for stakeholder engagement.

Through these initiatives, the NEOLAIa Living Lab Programme is building a transnational open innovation ecosystem that promotes collaboration, co-creation, and the scaling-up of solutions to key societal challenges advancing NEOLAIa's mission and contributing to the European Research Area.

Table of existing Living Labs and Collaborative platforms within the Alliance

UNIVERSITY (table 7)	Living Lab / Collaborative platforms	Main Thematics
UNIBI	CoR-Lab	Robotics, AI, cognition, automation
UT	Use Tech Lab	Health - robotics
ORU	AI Impact Lab	AI, health, industry, climate change, urban growth



ORU	Social Impact Lab	Social design – health – diversity and inclusion (12-month social innovations in partnership with local authorities)
OU	Refresh Project	4 regional Living Labs focused on environmental transition
USV	MANSiD	Advanced materials, nanotechnologies, distributed systems
ORU	Food and Health Platform	Health – Food
UJA	SICAPERMA	Research on rare earth recycling with 14 academic and industrial partners
UNISA	Greenopoli	Education on sustainable development in schools

The associated KPI is the establishment of ten collaborations. Although no collaborations have been reported to date, substantial preparatory work has been undertaken to enable their near-term launch.

By adhering to these priorities, the Alliance can bridge current gaps, scale up its collaborative research capacity, and deliver on its mission: high-quality, regionally impactful research that strengthens both the partner institutions and their territories.

12 Conclusions

By end of 2025, NEOLAIa has made solid progress towards building a research ecosystem characterised by excellence, collaboration, and regional relevance. The mapping of research strengths and bibliometric alignments with the SDGs has successfully identified areas of critical mass across partners, such as Global Health, Diversity & Inclusion, and Digital Infrastructures, that can serve as foci for impactful, place-sensitive research. The initial roll-out of the NRF, shared infrastructure mapping, expert support teams, and ESR-focused mobility and mentoring programmes has begun to operationalise the Alliance's vision. While not all KPIs have been met yet, momentum is strong: for instance, several seed projects have been funded, new collaborations initiated, and the ESR programme has enrolled 14 mentees across the Alliance.

However, the implementation thus far has also surfaced bottlenecks and risks. Differences in institutional practices, uneven resource disclosure, challenges in mentor recruitment, and delays in strategic embedding of the NRF highlight the need for continued alignment, coordination, and support.

Based on these conclusions, a key priority is to engage academic and professional services staff who are not directly involved in WP5. Successful research development requires whole institution participation, not only the efforts of WP5 delegates. Accordingly, upcoming WP5 work will place greater emphasis on substantive research supporting activities, not solely the "infrastructure" around research, through structured discussions and short showcases from active research teams. In parallel, WP5 will systematically map and communicate the concrete effects of its work (e.g. seed projects, collaborations, shared resources) both within the group and to wider university audiences. Over the next two years, WP5 meetings will be made more interactive to stimulate participation, while dissemination will be scaled up to extend reach and strengthen engagement across all partner universities.

These lessons provide a critical basis for the next phase, ensuring NEOLAIa's growth is steady, inclusive, and regionally attuned.

Work Ahead

1. Accelerate KPI delivery

- Achieve full ESR enrolment by ensuring two mentees per partner university and addressing current underrepresentation.
- Ensure all partners deploy, promote and follow up seed funding schemes to reach at least five projects per institution.
- Support remaining institutions in embedding the NRF into strategic documents through targeted engagement.
- Activities to support the forming of new collaborations.

2. Advance shared infrastructure and synergies

- Update the mapping of research infrastructures, databases, and expertise and work actively in engaging all the partner universities.



- Resolve technical and standardisation issues to ensure interoperability and usability.
 - Prioritise sharing of the information through activities such as webinars and local seminars on site.
- 3. Strengthening Expert Support Teams**
- Fully operationalise the three Research Expert Support Teams and extend their coordination and visibility.
- 4. Enhance ESR development and career pathways**
- Sustain and broaden ESR seminars with strong institutional participation and regional relevance.
 - Refine the ESR Mentorship Programme with improved matching, cross-disciplinary focus, and mobility opportunities.
 - Track mentee progress in publications, funding applications, and regional engagement, and implementing long-term follow up.
- 5. Activate the Living Lab hubs and stakeholder co-creation**
- Scale up Living Lab implementation at all partner universities with active stakeholder representation.
 - Deliver scheduled seminars and workshops, ensuring dissemination to widen impact.
- 6. Monitor, adapt, and communicate**
- Implement continuous KPI tracking with quarterly reviews and corrective measures.
 - Maintain transparency on challenges and risk mitigation with NEOLAiA governance bodies.
 - Prepare the revised NRF (due December 2026) drawing on lessons from Version 1 and partner feedback.