



Research and Innovation Agenda U!REKA Centre of Expertise Innovative Governance and Citizen Engagement

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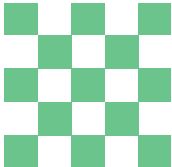
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1. Introduction to U!REKA Centres of Expertise

Objectives and contributions of U!REKA research and innovation

Supporting the EU Missions and other European initiatives. The European missions put research and innovation into a new role, combined with new forms of governance, participation and collaboration, in which engaging citizens, academics, students and professionals is key. EU Missions are a coordinated effort by the Commission to pool the necessary resources in terms of policies and regulations, as well as other activities [1] U!REKA will support the EU Mission: "Climate Neutral and Smart Cities" [2] with close links to the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change" [3], a Soil Deal for Europe" [4], and the proposed new Facility on New European Bauhaus [5].

Applied research and innovation (R&I) within the U!REKA European University will serve three purposes:

1. To contribute to the European state-of-the-art on evidence-based solutions towards our mission of climate neutral and smart cities
2. To respond to the specific challenges needs for our local, regional international stakeholder communities for research support on their strategies, policies, investments, decisions and activities towards climate neutral and smart cities
3. To provide the joint challenge-based learning and education to be developed within U!REKA with the necessary knowledge and research context, and to allow students to participate in research as an educational setting

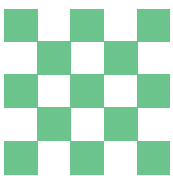
These R&I activities will be clustered in three complementary and strongly linked U!REKA Centres of Expertise: Climate Neutral and Resilient Cities, Transition to Circular Society, and Innovative Governance and Citizen Engagement.

This document addresses the overall R&I focus of the three U!REKA CoEs collectively. It should be noted that the R&I strategy will be continuously updated in line with the challenges our societal partners identify, European state-of-the-art and the further development of U!REKA's maturing as a European University.

U!REKA research focus

We can distinguish between 1) the initial focus that serves as the starting point of the U!REKA CoEs, and 2) the continuous cycle with which our R&I portfolio is finetuned towards the emerging needs of our stakeholder communities and educational programmes. The focus and selection of specific R&I areas is based on a combination of top-down (mission-led) and bottom-up (expertise-driven) approaches:

- The EU R&I agenda and the specific role of UAS in the European R&I landscape.

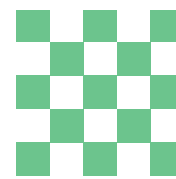


- Urban challenges that R&I will address. The engagement and interaction with UIREKA associated partner cities and regions, facilitated through the through cross-border events of the knowledge-creating community, to share experiences and know-how from across different ecosystems and stakeholders on the needs of our cities and urban stakeholders and the urban challenges they have identified.
- The ideas and suggestions of the UIREKA research community, which is based on the current research expertise at the UIREKA partners and the potential for strengthening through collaboration toward the urban challenges (bottom-up, driven by research staff expertise).
- Value for challenged-based education.
- Opportunities for financing of UIREKA research projects, such as the work programmes of Horizon Europe.
- EU policies on smart and climate neutral cities.

During the year 2024, the first year of the UIREKA project, we have identified an initial list of research areas. This was based the input from UIREKA partner universities' academic staff and research managers. The initial set of data was collected from online meetings and workshops of the three UIREKA Centres of Expertise, where researchers were asked about their areas of expertise and interests. Metropolia UAS also conducted a workshop for their research management to define institutional priorities on the research areas. We will match the research areas with the R&I needs that arise from the challenges European cities face in their pathways towards climate neutrality and resilience in a joint knowledge-creating community meeting.

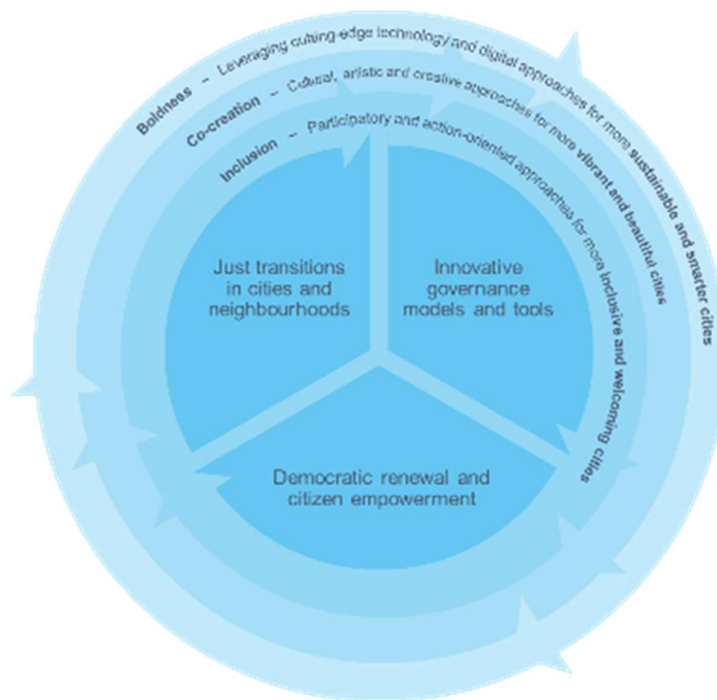
Our R&I priorities are not static. The research agenda is updated annually and prioritised based on the input of the UIREKA knowledge-creating community, which integrates across borders all the local stakeholder communities of the participating HEIs, their associated regions and cities. The aim is to align the joint agenda towards solving challenges that the UIREKA partner cities face, and which can be solved by pooling and combining the expertise from different UIREKA stakeholders, even those who are based in a different location. In addition, we take into account 1) the EU R&I agenda 2) the new suggestions and initiatives of UIREKA researcher community, 3) any changes in the partners' research portfolio, as well as 4) the challenges communicated from our associated partners.

In the coming period, UIREKA's knowledge creating community will further develop, which will identify specific needs for applied research. These will be incorporated into the portfolio of the CoEs. Also, UIREKA research activities will provide the expert knowledge that is required for challenged based learning in UIREKA. This research and innovation agenda therefore, is very much subject to an open and dynamic process, to be updated regularly.



2. R&I agenda U!REKA CoE *Innovative Governance and Citizen Engagement*

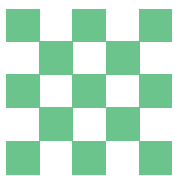
The U!REKA Centre of Expertise for Innovative Governance Models and Citizen Engagement aims to create opportunities for synergy and engagement across all levels of stakeholders in the U!REKA ecosystem. In addition to introducing the research focus areas, the scope of the Centre of Expertise requires specific attention to how the R&I activities are conducted, reflected in the structure of this R&I Agenda. Thus, three cross-cutting approaches complement the three research focus areas to provide the needed depth to the agenda for an inherently interactive, dynamic and multifaceted effort to shape transition with varied stakeholders and within complex societal and social-ecological systems.



Research focus areas (in the center) and cross-cutting approaches (on the surrounding spheres) of the Centre of Expertise for Innovative Governance Models and Citizen Engagement

2.1. Research focus 1: Just climate transitions in cities and neighbourhoods

A just transition prioritises social fairness in addressing environmental and climate challenges while reducing socio-economic inequalities. This research focus explores governance models and on the ground R&I activities that enable fair and inclusive transitions towards climate-neutral cities. It links closely to the



European Commission's New European Bauhaus initiative that calls for neighbourhood level solutions that combine sustainability with good design, inclusivity, accessibility, and affordability for varied European contexts. It addresses how public institutions can lead systemic change, visible at neighbourhood level, while engaging diverse communities through transparent processes and inclusive dialogue.

This includes exploring behavioural science insights and participatory design approaches to support public decision-making, rebuilding trust in local democracy, and incorporating cultural heritage and diversity into participatory urban development. By understanding how people process information and make decisions, behavioural science can help identify drivers that turn awareness into sustained behaviour change. Key principles align with the New European Bauhaus (NEB): sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion.

Research topics include:

- Urban development and planning; placemaking and tactical urbanism
- Scaling up the New European Bauhaus solutions to foster social and physical transformation on the neighbourhood level
- Behavioural insights and supporting/nudging for climate action
- Community trust-building and institutional transparency
- Cultural identities and inclusive local governance
- Evaluating sustainability interventions
- Participatory design methods for sustainable transition and engagement
- Economic policy actions to foster affordable future-oriented housing structures in urban areas

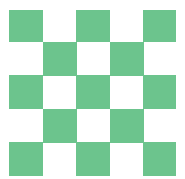
2.2. Research focus 2: Governance models, policy and digital tools for innovative decision-making and cross-sector collaboration

Changes in the cities' demographics, climate change, and growing socio-economic disparities are reshaping cities and challenging conventional models of governance and planning. This research area focuses on governance innovation, aiming to develop, prototype, and assess cross-sectoral policies, democratic processes, and digital tools that enable participatory urban transformation. It aims to enable citizens and other stakeholders to work together with public administrations, regulators and policymakers as well as enhancing cross-sectoral and -sectional collaboration to tackle the complex challenges related to climate neutrality.

We explore governance mechanisms such as public-private-people partnerships, urban commons, and collective ownership. This includes developing and accessing digital governance tools, data ethics, and co-creation platforms while addressing the digital divide and cybersecurity.

Research topics include:

- Policy innovation for climate adaptation and mitigation, adaptive governance



- Experimental and participatory governance, following systematic processes vs. need for rapid responses, why/when traditional governance approaches fail, future-thinking and
- -making
- Grassroots initiatives, feedback loop between citizens and policymakers, how to change governance models and prioritise bottom-up solutions
- Public-private-people partnerships and alternative business models
- Urban commons as collaborative resource governance
- Ethical digital technologies for inclusive governance. Role and contribution of artists, cultural and creative sector, and decentralising governance through small interventions
- Unpacking policies and compensation mechanisms, detecting social injustice embedded in those policies
- Lessons learned and good practices for application of solutions identified from previous crisis situations, and remote approaches e.g., COVID-19 pandemic
- Multilevel governance, citizen engagement and public policy making to foster urban transformation (from a political science and economic perspective)
- Human-centred digital governance frameworks: integrating ethical AI and digital humanism for participatory decision-making

2.3. Research focus 3: Citizens' empowerment and agency to strengthen European democracies

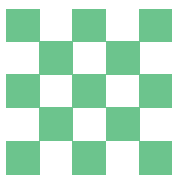
Ongoing poly-crisis threatens to polarise our societies and divert attention from the fight against climate change. Simultaneously, strengthening European democracies requires a shift from tokenistic consultation to meaningful, sustained engagement, where citizens are not only heard but co-create solutions. Climate and future anxiety are a growing challenge, particularly among the younger generations, which can, in part, be alleviated by identifying personal and shared agency and the experience of being able to influence future trajectories.

The research focus investigates how democratic institutions can be revitalised by placing citizens at the centre of decision-making. It moves beyond consultation towards shared governance and co-creation, grounded in trust, solidarity, and civic imagination.

It explores life-long learning, civic competencies, and employability—particularly for underrepresented groups—as enablers of citizen agency, democratic participation, cultivation of skills to navigate the transition, and regional competitiveness.

Research topics include:

- Citizen agency and participatory (local) democracy
- Stewardship for sustainability transformations
- Institutional innovation for inclusive governance; policy innovation



- Innovative pedagogy, life-long learning and civic capability-building; opportunities for everyone: youth, elderly citizens, immigrants and underrepresented groups
- Civic tech and digital platforms for engagement
- Social innovations and planet, human-centredness in practice
- Co-curiosity; collaborative inquiry into new solutions and new knowledge of a joint interest
- Bringing visibility to people's voices and effective (attractive) initiatives
- Creative methods for sustainable innovation: making visible when, why and how action is needed
- Institutional and public policies to strengthen regional competitiveness from an economic perspective
- From threat to opportunities for European societies: Gender and diversity perspectives in liberal democracies

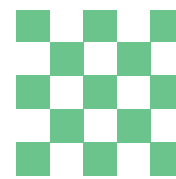
Cross-cutting approaches. The cross-cutting approaches build upon the leading expertise within the UIREKA Alliance. They connect the values of the UIREKA (Boldness, Co-creation, and Inclusion) and New European Bauhaus (Sustainable, Beautiful, and Inclusive) to the practical RDI activities of the CoE (see Picture 6. 1). All research and development activities implemented under the Centre of Expertise ideally utilise effective participatory and/or action-oriented approaches. When the opportunity calls, these are enhanced and enriched by harnessing cultural, artistic, and creative approaches to engage citizens, boost holistic well-being, and add value beyond mere functionality. A human-centred, user-friendly, and equitable approach to technology is present in all RDI activities related to developing or studying digital tools or technologies.

2.4. Participatory and action-oriented approaches for more inclusive and welcoming cities

Driving meaningful climate action requires a strong emphasis on social components, and participatory approaches are essential. Our first cross-cutting approach fosters more inclusive and responsive cities through participatory methods and action research. This approach emphasises local knowledge, co-creation with communities, and real-world testing of policy interventions.

In the scope of the New European Bauhaus, the concept of inclusion is accompanied by the pursuit towards equality, accessibility and affordability, which builds on granting and securing equal access to opportunities and resources for all and encouraging exchanges across cultures, genders and ages. This cross-cutting approach also puts into action the UIREKA Alliance's commitment to creating an open and welcoming learning environment where diverse perspectives are valued, aiming to provide all participants with the support they need to ensure equal opportunities for success.

2.5. Cultural, artistic, and creative approaches for more vibrant and beautiful cities



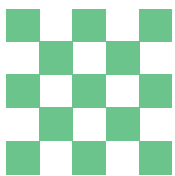
Art and culture, in all their diversity, play an important role in making our lives beautiful and meaningful. They can be also critical tools for engaging citizens in sustainability transitions and facilitating behavioural and societal changes. This cross-cutting approach includes, for example, artistic interventions, social and human-centred design, cultural programming, and creative urban planning that fosters a sense of ownership and can promote desired change.

In the context of the New European Bauhaus, the concept of beautiful cities translates to (re)activating the qualities of a given context while contributing to our physical and mental well-being. It can connect different places and people while fostering a sense of belonging through meaningful collective experiences; and integrating new enduring cultural and social values through the creative process. This approach facilitates the transdisciplinary engagement needed to bring to life the U!REKA Alliance value of co-creation—to create and share knowledge across disciplines and sectors to address societal challenges and co-create solutions that make a meaningful impact.

2.6. Leveraging emerging technology and digital approaches for more sustainable and smarter cities

Harnessing digital tools for urban sustainability and participatory governance, including city models, BIM, IoT, AI, socio tech, and civic platforms. The focus is on the human-centredness of the technology development, as well as an ethical, secure, sustainable and inclusive deployment that enhances transparency and citizen trust.

Here, we keep to the definition of sustainability used in the European GreenComp Framework, i. e. prioritising the needs of all life forms and of the planet by ensuring that human activity does not exceed planetary boundaries. In this context, we seek to leverage the potential of emerging technologies to inspire urban stakeholders to explore new possibilities and aim for ambitious goals, aligning with the U!REKA value of Boldness.



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