YUFE Alliance: An interinstitutional and multicultural endeavour to boost European (entrepreneurship) education

This case in a nutshell

Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) is an Alliance emerging from a European Commission initiative to provide examples of what a European University should look like. YUFE has been active since 2019 and currently consists of nine young universities in Europe and two non-academic partners. They have a strong interest in promoting education that is student-centred and oriented towards solving practical societal challenges, embracing multiculturalism as a key trait of the European Union. The Alliance has a series of instruments to promote entrepreneurship and innovation: almost imporantly, Challenge Teams that seeks to develop solutions to societal issues and Yufethon, an online competition of innovative ideas. Moreover, the Inno4YUFE project promotes innovation , and YUFERING fosters research and knowledge transfer with business and civil society. YUFE has received positive feedback about its challenge-based approach, the involvement of citizens as additional stakeholders besides businesses and governments, and the wide promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship.

1   Background

Profile of the YUFE Alliance

Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) is **one of the 17 Alliances** selected by the European Commission (EC) in 2019 as part of its European Universities Initiative ([EUI](#)). EUI seeks to strengthen collaboration among universities within the European Union (EU) to enhance their competitiveness, boost cross-border education and promote European identity and values, such as empathy, solidarity and social cohesion.[1] The initiative seeks to create student-centred curricula through a challenge-based approach that results in more sustainability and excellence for the participating universities.[2]

YUFE is coordinated by Maastricht University and represents **nine universities** from nine different countries as well as two non-academic members.[3] During the piloting phase (until November 2022), over 800 students benefited from the Alliance's activities. YUFE has four focus areas: European identity and responsibilities in a global world; citizens' wellbeing; digital societies; and sustainability.[4] An antecedent of this Alliance is the Young European Research Universities Network ([YERUN](#)), in which six participating universities had already taken part. The transition towards YUFE was motivated by the aim of these universities to deepen their efforts towards employability, mobility schemes for students and staff, inclusive higher education and the promotion of multiculturalism and European languages.

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[1] Mentioned in the paper *"Research and work-based learning ecosystem in YUFE Alliance: The Challenge Teams experience"* presented at the UIIN International Conference (June 14, 2022) https://www.uiin.org/2022-conference/schedule/ - day-2

[2] For detailed information about the initiative, see: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative.

[3] The higher education institutions are: Maastricht University (NL), University of Antwerp (BE), University of Bremen (DE), University of Cyprus (CY), University of Essex (UK), University of Eastern Finland (FI), Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (ES), University of Rijeka (HR) and Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (PL). The non-academic partners are: ETS Global and the Adecco Group.

[4] See https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-factsheet-yufe-updated-jan-2021.pdf.

According to the Alliance, all YUFE members are young, research-intensive, student-centred and non-elitist universites with a strong interest in widening the cooperation with citizens to co-create new opportunities and initiatives. To this extent, the Alliance promotes the quadruple helix approach, i.e. close ties with academia, industry, government and civil society.[5]

2 Objectives

The Alliance puts student-centredness and the contribution to a more competitive, innovative and united Europe at the forefront of its goals. YUFE seeks to "bring radical change and transform European higher education".[6] Consequently, YUFE emphasises the role of entrepreneurship and innovation. The Alliance recognises that innovation and entrepreneurship will help address socioeconomic challenges[7] within the European labour markets. Therefore, YUFE promotes an entrepreneurial mindset as a critical transversal skill. YUFE members have agreed on a research-and work-based approach to promoting high-impact entrepreneurship and innovation, leading to challenge-oriented education.

YUFE responds to current societal phenomena around emerging technologies, globalisation and environmental discussions. The Alliance assumes that subject-related, technical skills are necessary to promote inclusive societies. Still, technical skills need to be coupled with transversal skills – i.e., skills useful for many different jobs, such as critical thinking – that address the digital economy in the context of multiculturalism. Therefore, YUFE offers multidisciplinary training opportunities to promote a wider understanding of societal issues (and avoid a silos mentality). These offerings include the courses *critical thinking skills, digital professional communication* or *intercultural communication*, which can be coursed as additional subjects, complementing the programme's syllabus. With this approach, the Alliance seeks to break down barriers between society and academia by providing students the opportunity to enrich their academic home degree with professional and cultural experiences that nurture their ability to address local problems.

3 Resources used for developing and running the Alliance

As an EU-funded initiative, YUFE initially received €5 million for the operation of the Alliance as the result of the first call for European Universities in 2019.[8] In 2022, the Alliance secured further funding worth over €14 million from the Erasmus+ European Universities call for proposals.[9]

YUFE's efforts regarding innovation and entrepreneurship are coordinated by *Universidad Carlos III de Madrid* (Spain). This network of young universities in Europe aimed to voice their interests and concerns, showcase their achievements, and promote **knowledge transfer and dissemination** via joint educational activities and research opportunities.

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[5] See https://yufe.eu/who-we-are/#about-yufe.

[6] See https://yufe.eu/who-we-are/#yufe-vision.

[7] These include a wide range of activities, such as reducing pollution and exploiting the potential of traditionally considered "waste" to become inputs in other sectors (as in the circular economy paradigm); changing consumption patterns to be more sustainable, among others.

[8] See the European Commission's press release here: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_3389.

[9] See https://yufe.eu/yufe/yufe2030/.

4   Activities

How YUFE strives for achieving its objectives

Overview

YUFE runs several targeted activities to fulfil its objectives towards a more competitive, innovative, and united Europe: Educational offers with a Student Journey and a Star System as well as dedicated activities for staff and the general public. While these activities are not explicitly about entrepreneurship and innovation, they foster entrepreneurial mindsets as they require students and staff to plan their activities, engage with the community, and cope with related challenges.

Educational offers

YUFE has established the **Student Journey** as a pathway to combine academic training with professional training and civic engagement activites (see below: activities for wider audiences). This Journey is customisable: Students can shape their individual learning path with offers from the nine participating universities, some counting as electives, on top of the mandatory subjects considered in their syllabus. The courses are reported by the responsible universities in YUFE's Virtual Campus, and can be attended online or onsite. For the period 2022-23, the academic repository includes over 900 academic courses and activities from across Europe, out of which more than 200 online. The topics are very diverse, for example bioethics, datascience, microeconomics, ecotourism, international humanitarian law and languages..[10]

YUFE's educational offerings are further complemented through its **Star System,** which seeks to promote and acknowledge extra-curricular activities for personal and professional development and recognises participants' efforts with a YUFE Star certificate. The system comprises four types of recognition: First, the Mobility Star encourages learners to seek international exposure, fostering multiculturalism. Second, the Language Star combines formal learning with practice and real-life language experiences. Third, the Civic Star is for societal engagement and activities in the local community. Fourth, and most relevant here, the Professional Star focuses on entrepreneurship and innovation competences based on the EntreComp framework.[11] The Professional Star allows students to apply for credit validation in their degree.[12] For the period 2021-2022, 47 students registered and 14 of those succesfully completed all activities linked to the Professional Star.

Activities for staff

Staff members at the participating universities are a critical target group within YUFE as they influence the organisations' teaching, research and knowledge transfer activities. Offers are open to academic staff, temporary researchers and professional service staff. The Alliance's staff programme is a collaboration opportunity based on the **lifelong learning** approach. It provides mobility and training across participating higher education institutions (HEIs). As regards training, YUFE's professional staff development opportunities offer several short-term training options, including language courses and transversal skills (e.g. leadership and communication or smart working with digital technologies), and other topics (e.g. behaviour change).

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[10] See https://virtualcampus.yufe.eu/p/home.

[11] The European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) is the European Commission's framework to provide a reference of what is meant by an entreprenurial mindset, underpinnign the knowledge, skills and attitudes considered essencial to develop such mindset and apply it to create financial, social or cultural value. For detailed information, see: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1317&langId=en.

[12] See https://yufe.eu/yufe/yufe-professonial-star-activities/

Activities for wider audiences

As part of the quadruple helix approach, the Alliance has set up a dedicated module for citizens. The module provides people not directly linked to the participating universities with services resulting in new skills, networking, volunteering or counselling. The universities offering activities for citizens published their available opportunities on the cities and citizens' website. The activities include help desks with thematic offerings for different audiences, e.g. young entrepreneurs or migrants, or student counseling centres to liaise with residents. Additionally, the universities offer volunteering schemes to foster knowledge transfer between academic communities and societal actors.

Additionally, YUFE has a volunteering scheme to strengthen ties between the its community and other societal actors, which includes (i) *YUFE LearningTogether:* to support high-school students from adverse socioeconomic contexts, (ii) *YUFE Teaching Digital Literacy:* to reduce the digital divide through supporting ICT-mediated public administration procedures *or* (iii) *YUFE Contigo:* to promote the integration of elderly citizens affected by loneliness.[13]

Outreach and community management

The quadruple helix approach followed by YUFE implies that not only academic communities participate in designing the European university of the future, but also civil society, as well as public officials and industry representatives. Besides implementing the Challenge Teams, where the industry is a pivotal actor, YUFE deploys two instruments to support stakeholder engagement and position the Alliance's interests concerning higher education.

Firstly, the *Town Hall initiative* is a 2.5-day umbrella event involving all of YUFE's content to foster interaction among the YUFE community. The 2020 version had to be held online due to the COVID-19 restrictions, and it focused on "European Higher Education and its links to wider society".[14] This first version presented the vision and asked a wide range of stakeholders about how European universities could respond to their needs. The 2021 version was held in Bremen (Universität Bremen hosted the meeting) between the 13-14 of October. On that occasion, the YUFE community promoted a wider scope and invited different political representatives of the YUFE locations to exchange ideas on how the Alliance's preliminary results could inform local policymaking.[15]

Second, the *Mayor's meetings*, a yearly event where government representatives get together to discuss the Alliance's main achievements (their implications for the territories) and shape the future milestones and synergies with the city's institutional offer in educational and other fields close to YUFE's activities. For instance, the first session took place in Maastricht in January 2020, where representatives of Bremen's local government presented the programmes "*here:ahead*"[16] (cooperation of the universities of the state of Bremen as well as the Center for Foreign Languages Bremen) and *"SeniorCitizens"[17]* (a network that encircles multiple generations and cultures). The second Mayor's meeting coincided with YUFE's Town Hall event held in Bremen in October 2021 and gathered around 60 participants.[18]

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[13] For details about these programmes, see https://virtualcampus.yufe.eu/link/university/O5XTChIWTWczjdcv.

[14] See the following link for details on the scope and recordings: https://yufe.eu/townhall-2020/#BiographyDT.

[15] See https://uniri.hr/en/vijesti/yufe-town-hall-2021-in-bremen/.

[16] See https://www.aheadbremen.de/en/.

[17] See https://www.uni-bremen.de/en/seniorcitizens.

[18] See https://www.uni-bremen.de/en/cooperation/university-cooperation-1/yufe-young-universities-for-the-future-of-europe/news-1/zehn-europaeische-universitaeten-treffen-sich-in-bremen-1

Challenges

The Alliance's main challenge is coordination among nine universities. YUFE's activities have been delayed due to the lack of common procedures that help incorporate the Alliance's activities within the HEIs' offerings. Coordinating efforts across HEIs has been complex as higher education in different countries is governed differently, implying varied administrative procedures, e.g., stemming from legal provisions for HEIs. An example is different data protection agreements across HEIs. It has been challenging to harmonise data protection procedures across HEIs, affecting the implementation of activities, especially those involving people not linked to the universities, e.g., citizens or external mentors. The lack of harmonised procedures across HEIs has also delayed the implementation of up- and reskilling efforts, i.e., customisable learning approaches or quick career development strategies that equip staff with new competences.[19]

Another example is securing the longer-term operation of YUFE as one European University. The Alliance operates with EU funding coming from the first call for proposals for the EUI. Ensuring the operation beyond the funding period demands that the HEIs agree on a sustainability strategy and concrete commitments, which is challenging to coordinate among the nine members.

Developing the programme further

With the second round of funding (from the Erasmus+ European Universities' call for proposals) for the period 2022-2026, YUFE seeks to deepen and scale up its successful activities and assess how to better respond to its target groups' needs. Moreover, the Alliance plans to launch an online **innovation platform**, a multi-sector and multidisciplinary ecosystem that fosters research and innovation. It brings together the experiences of its community under a single platform and places its training and extra-curricular offerings.[20] They aim to connect YUFE members with external actors (e.g. companies or NGOs), promoting opportunities for collaboration and increasing the visibility of current achievements. Ultimately, the challenges are expected to originate within the platform through organic interaction among the YUFE community, resulting in more legitimacy (of the challenges) and regional capacity-building.

5   Entrepreneurial activities

Projects around innovation and entrepreneurship

The training offerings constitute the core component of YUFE. The Alliance currently runs two main activities related to entrepreneurship and innovation: YUFE Challenge Teams and YUFE Entrepreneurial Training Programme. Inno4YUFE, YUFERING, and DIOSI are projects where further notable activities on the topic are being launched.

YUFE Challenge Teams

YUFE Challenge Teams pursue a bottom-up approach to problem-based learning. The teams address pressing issues affecting industry, academia or society, such as widening the political spectrum to be more democratic and finding ways to halt climate change. To tackle these issues, the initiative seeks to

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[19] For further details ont his regard, see YUFE's staff development policy here: https://virtualcampus.yufe.eu/p/StaffPortal.

[20] The innovation platform was originally planned to be launched earlier; however, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to its postponement until 2023.

foster cooperation across different stakeholders such as students, researchers, public and private experts, and citizens, incentivising multi-disciplinarity and multiculturalism.

The teamwork takes place in a three-month period with training activities such as workshops and mentoring, and the total workload is approximately 60-75 hours. Mentoring comes from academic and non-academic experts to promote technical and professional skills for career development. Following YUFE's quadruple helix approach, students, researchers and citizens can participate in the Challenge Teams to interact with challenge owners, i.e., partners from industry or public organisations. Figure 1 presents the basic team structure.

Figure 1: YUFE Challenge Teams structure
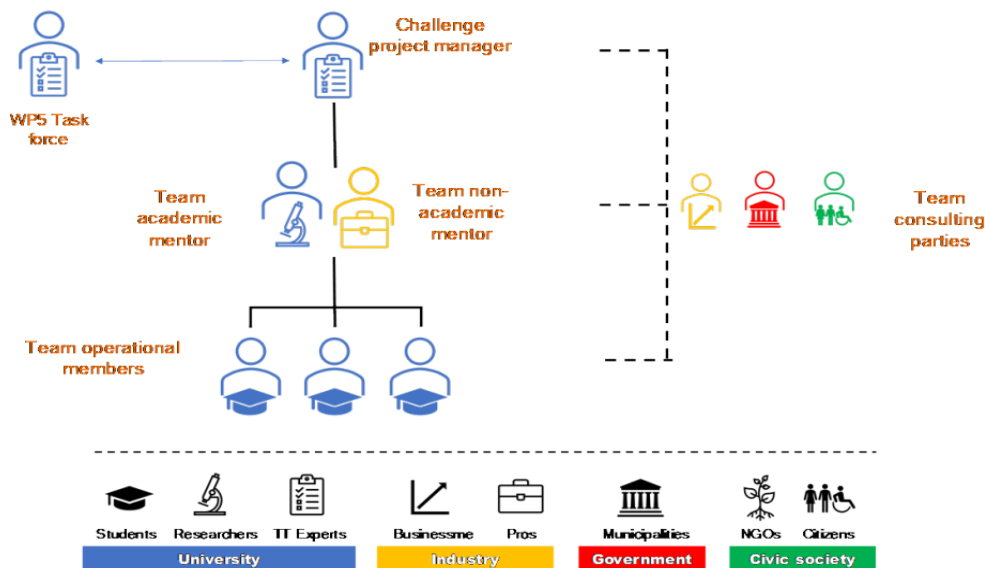
Source: Own representation, adapted from Herrero-Villa, Lopez-Castro, Constantinou & Christodoulou, E (2022).

YUFE assigns pre-defined challenges to the teams, resulting from periodic calls for proposals. The selection of challenges, submitted by any stakeholder, considers multiple factors such as novelty and required innovativeness, possibilities for multidisciplinary and multi-agent approaches, expected impact, sustainability, and scalability. Moreover, finding a solution for the challenge in the considered period must be feasible, i.e. within an academic semester. The challenges stem from real-life cases. The problems can be regional, national, European or global.

In 2021–2022, YUFE tested the instrument with two challenges: (1) *understanding rapid sharing of medical patient data for combating pandemics and other diseases* and (2) *awareness of verbal violence in political speeches and meetings*. The most popular challenge based on the registration statistics was the second challenge, which accounted for 70% of the students registered (30). Moreover, all YUFE universities were represented in at least one of the challenges; however, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and Maastricht University accounted for 50% of all students participating in both challenges. The test phase found that immediate availability of mentors was challenging. Hence, YUFE started to implement a pool of mentors, all pro-bono, from which the Alliance can draw.

Students' feedback supports the problem-based learning approach, making it an innovative trait of this instrument. Additionally, technical challenges seemed to be more prone to entrepreneurial solutions, based on participants' comments, suggesting a need for more training, discussion and dissemination

around links between entrepreneurship and social problems. The Alliance is also implementing awareness-raising activities on the importance of other sources of value creation, such as cultural and social, which are supplementary to the economic dimension.

For the period 2022-2023, YUFE will have eight challenges. They will revolve around the following three themes: product design applied to training around new technologies, developing educational platforms that rely on reusing medical data, as well as social phenomena like community-building in diverse educational contexts and inclusive leadership.

YUFE Entrepreneurial Training Programme

YUFE Entrepreneurial Training Programme is a multi-instrument approach to incentivise the entrepreneurial mindset of students enrolled at the universities in the Alliance. The programme adds value to the domestic offers of these higher education institutions by offering additional resources through three novel formats: MOOCs, entrepreneurial talks, and an annual competition named YUFETHON. The programme is offered for students,[21] and its completion will take two years.

YUFE has mapped several *Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)* based on EntreComp. For the 2022-2023 catalogue, YUFE identified 27 online courses offered by several international providers. YUFE structured them based on their duration and skills fostered: e.g., vision and creativity, financial and economic literacy, planning and management, among many others.[22] These MOOCs are promoted among students interested in acquiring entrepreneurial skills, and students have up to two years to finalise these activities. For the first cohort (2021-2022), 23 students participated in at least one MOOC; in the upcoming cohort, the number of registrations amounts to 42.[23]

The *entrepreneurial talks* are thematic talk shows with a duration of 2.5 hours each (similar to TED formats) organised monthly (except for the students' holidays period) and alternately by the member universities, so that students gather further insights about current topics in entrepreneurship. So far, YUFE has produced **ten** entrepreneurial talks. Each focused on a specific competence, e.g., motivation and perseverance; coping with uncertainty, ambiguity and risk; learning through experience, as well as ethical and sustainable thinking. For 2023, examples of scheduled talks include the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework and disruptive technologies as opportunities for value creation.

Lastly, the training programme concludes with the YUFETHON, a yearly competition (two-day event) that invites students to cooperate and develop innovative and entrepreneurial missions or objectives. To participate in this competition, students must first enrol in one of the MOOCs and listen to the entrepreneurial talks. The YUFETHON is the last evaluative activity of the Entrepreneurial Training Programme. The 2022 version held on October 7th and 8th considers five challenges, with the following themes: social responsibility, education, loneliness and mental health, mobility and housing. 46 students registered for the 2022 version. Table 1 summarises these challenges.

Table 1: YUFETHON Challenges in 2022

Challenge	Scope

Social responsibility	Three potential topics to choose from: 1. Social participation in the community. 2. Refugees. 3. Negative feedback in social communication and decision-making.
Education	Three potential topics to choose from: 1. Early school leavers. 2. The integration of international students. 3. The university of the future.
Loneliness and mental health problems	Two potential topics to choose from: 1. Young people. 2. Elderly.
Mobility	Bikes and skates.
Housing	Two potential topics to choose from: 1. Housing shortage among young people in the cities. 2. Build houses from a sustainable perspective.

Source: empirica, based on YUFETHON documentation.

INNO4YUFE

Besides the Challenge Teams and the Training Programme, the Alliance launched **Inno4YUFE**,[24] a YUFE's project aiming to remove barriers to student entrepreneurship and strengthen the role of HEIs as supporters of entrepreneurial career paths. The project seeks to connect students within innovation ecosystems across Europe to instigate collaboration outside the classroom and create value to tackle societal challenges. Specifically, Inno4YUFE connects the YUFE community with the Knowledge Innovation Communities (KICs) of the European Institute of Technology. The EIT KICs are partnerships of HEIs, research centres and businesses to boost entrepreneurial endeavours. The project grants students and researchers access to the YUFE Flipped Knowledge Transfer Office to receive feedback about how to transform innovative ideas into concrete initiatives to be exploited in the market.

YUFERING

Another relevant project is **YUFERING**: YUFE Transforming research and innovation (R&I) through Europe-wide Knowledge Transfer. This knowledge transfer initiative seeks to mainstream open science practices,[25] and fosters collaboration between academia, business and civil society to tackle global problems through local solutions ("glocal" approach).

The project closely aligns with the vision for the European Research Area (ERA) to integrate research, innovation and technology across the EU. YUFERING sees to contribute to the promotion of citizen science and societal engagement in R&I ecosystems. Moreover, this initiative will provide recommendations that serve both the participating HEIs and other organisations working towards the inclusivity of R&I.

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[24] This project receives funding from European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) HEI initiative: Innovation Capacity Building for Higher Education.

[25] These include, for instance, makin scientific research and ist dissemination accessible, understandable and inclusive for society at large. For more information concerning the term's scope see: https://www.unesco.org/en/natural-sciences/open-science.

YUFERING has received additional funding –from Horizon 2020– of approximately €2 million for the period 2021-2024 and is coordinated by the University of Cyprus.[26]

DIOSI

The DIOSI project ran from January 2021 to December 2022. It included training on open science as well as open innovation and entrepreneurship for doctoral candidates and early career researchers. The project measured the impact of such training by creating an impact and graduate tracking framework. The project had train-the-trainer sessions to build capacity and expertise open science and open innovation. The newly educated trainers ran pilots session at their home institutions. Up to 900 doctoral candidates and early career researchers benefited from the training. Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium, coordinated the framework.

6   Lessons learnt

Since YUFE started operations in 2019, the Alliance has received positive feedback about its challenge-based approach, the involvement of citizens as additional stakeholders (besides businesses and governments) and the wide promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship as enablers of impactful education. By bringing together these actors with diverse interests, YUFE has further reflected the role of higher education as a mirror of societal concerns. Moreover, by enabling citizens to participate in YUFE initiatives such as the Help Desks andChallenge Teams, the Alliance makes the learning space more democratic, underpinning that individuals with different life experiences can contribute to solving societal problems.

Through the Challenge Teams, one of its most developed instruments, YUFE has also gained insights to enhance its offer and ensure a larger outreach. The role of mentors in helping the Teams approach the challenges is enriching, according to the feedback received; however, ensuring continuous availability of mentors has been difficult. The organising committee identified that frequently, social problems are perceived as less challenging or entrepreneurial than technical ones. This realisation points to the need to emphasise the role of innovation and entrepreneurship as catalysts for social change, showcasing good practices that exemplify their potential applied to societal challenges. Lastly, bearing in mind that Challenge Teams are an extra-curricular activity, the abandonment rate has been high during the first two challenges (around 50%). YUFE considers additional incentives so that students continue throughout the activity and external stakeholders feel that the Challenge Teams are benefiting them as well.

The maturity levels in certain topics, including entrepreneurship education, vary across HEIs, which requires alignment through developing common training offerings.

Sources

This case study was prepared by Alexander Cuartas-Acosta and Dr. Stefan Lilischkis from empirica Gesellschaft für Kommunikations- und Technologieforschung mbH (Bonn, Germany), through collection and analysis of broad documentation about the YUFE Alliance and interviews with key representatives from the Alliance.

The status of the information provided in this case study is October 2022.

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[26] The funding corresponds to the Call Science with and for Society, under Horizon 2020. See https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101016967.

Contact

Dr. Maria Jose Herrero-Villa, Work package leader for Innovation and Entrepreneurship – Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Email: mjherrer@pa.uc3m.es.