

Best Practices and Recommendations for the Sustainability of EU Research Diaspora Organisations in the UK

**Lessons from a focus group analysis
by CONNECTS-UK**

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- The Austro-UK Science Alliance (AUKSA) - **Austria**
- Association Penkala - **Croatia**
- NEPOMAK - **Cyprus**
- French Education and Research Network in the UK (FERN-UK) - **France**
- The Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students (DOSZ) - **Hungary**
- Association of Italian Scientists in the UK (AISUK) - **Italy**
- Association of Latvian Students and Researchers in the UK (ALSRUK) - **Latvia**
- Dutch Network of Academics in the UK (DNU in UK) - **The Netherlands**
- Polonium Foundation - **Poland**
- Portuguese Association of Researchers and Students in the UK (PARSUK) - **Portugal**
- Society of Spanish Researchers in the UK (SRUK/CERU) - **Spain**
- Association of Slovenians Educated Abroad (VTIS) - **Slovenia**
- Ukrainian-British Academic Society (UBAS) - **Ukraine**

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1. Executive Summary

This report explores the organisational development, challenges, and opportunities of national EU research diaspora organisations based in the United Kingdom. These associations, largely volunteer-led, connect researchers abroad through community building, scientific exchange, and representation in both research and policy arenas.

Drawing on a focus group discussion with representatives from 13 organisations, the study analyses three core areas: professionalisation, funding strategies, and sustainability. Since there are limited research studies on the dynamics and organisational characteristics of national research diaspora groups and associations, the present study aims to provide a general exploration of a specific case of national research diasporas: the EU diasporas in the United Kingdom. While the data gathered from focus group and its analysis does not necessarily reflect the full diversity of experiences across the sector, it provides a useful summary of shared challenges and approaches, encompassing both long-established and newly formed associations.

The report concludes with best practices and recommendations to strengthen the resilience of EU research diaspora organisations in the UK. These include gradually formalising structures while maintaining flexibility, supporting volunteers through paid administrative roles, diversifying funding sources, fostering collaboration with peer organisations, and ensuring continuity through structured leadership handovers and intergenerational engagement.

2. Background

In recent years, research diaspora organisations have emerged as important actors connecting scientific and research communities across borders. These mostly grassroots groups, initiated and run by researchers living and working abroad, serve as platforms for professional networking, peer support, knowledge exchange, and community building¹. They have also proven to be an important actor in science diplomacy².

Research diaspora organisations have a vital role in strengthening the global research ecosystem. By promoting international collaboration and the circulation of talent and knowledge, they act as flexible yet strategic bridges between home and host countries. They create and maintain connections locally, nationally, and internationally, therefore contributing to both global research excellence and bringing to light their countries' scientific outputs and achievements.

This report, led and developed by CONNECTS-UK, a project co-funded by the European Union, focuses specifically on EU research diaspora organisations in the United Kingdom (UK). These are non-profit and volunteer-led national research diaspora organisations from several EU countries that are based in the UK. The UK has historically been a major destination for European researchers³, making it a significant hub in transnational research mobility. However, the post-Brexit environment introduced new challenges, including increased uncertainty in research funding frameworks, shifts in migration policy, and changes in institutional relationships⁴. Against this backdrop, the EU research diaspora organisations in the UK play a bridging role in promoting effective dialogue between the governments of the EU and its member states and UK governmental institutions, research organisations, and civil society.

The present research study draws on focus group data to analyse the organisational structures, diverse funding strategies, and membership dynamics of EU research diaspora organisations. Thus, it offers insights into both convergent and divergent practices among organisations and recommendations to enhance their sustainability.

¹Tejada, Gabriela, "Mobility, Knowledge, and Cooperation: Scientific Diasporas as Agents of Development", *Migration and development*, 10(18), 66, 2012. <https://estudiosdeldesarrollo.mx/migracionydesarrollo/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/18ing-3.pdf>.

² Butler, Dorothy, et al., "Science Diaspora Networks: A Report on Their Goals, Functions, and Future", National Science Policy Network, 8, 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alessandra-Zimmermann/publication/363540043_Science_Diaspora_Networks_A_Report_on_Their_Goals_Functions_and_Future/links/6321fa870a70852150f32fff/Science-Diaspora-Networks-A-Report-on-Their-Goals-Functions-and-Future.pdf.

³ Ackers, Louise, and Bryony Gill. "Moving People and Knowledge," 2008. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781848444867>

⁴ Corbett, Anne and Linda Hantrais, "Higher education and research in the Brexit policy", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30:11, 2397, 2023. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13501763.2023.2181854>.

3. Objective:

Characterising EU Research Diaspora Organisations in the UK

The purpose of this study is to characterise the organisational development and activity of EU research diaspora organisations active in the United Kingdom. These organisations, built around shared nationality, connect researchers working abroad, promoting community-building and peer support, facilitating scientific exchange, and representing diaspora perspectives within the research and policy landscape of both the UK and their home country in the EU.

The present research delves into how these organisations evolve, sustain themselves, and respond to both structural and contextual challenges, with the ultimate objective of generating practical insights and identifying best practices that can support the future development of EU research diaspora organisations in the UK.

In particular, the core areas of focus address how these organisations approach professionalisation, secure funding, and maintain organisational sustainability over time:

- I. Professionalisation: how these organisations formalise structures and organisational charts, develop internal decision-making processes, engage with external stakeholders, increase their visibility and influence in the scientific and diplomatic context, and utilise resources, tools or strategies to enhance productivity and reach.
- II. Funding strategies: how these organisations develop approaches to access financial resources at various levels (partnerships, sponsorships, grants, donations, fees) and from various sources (public institutions, private organisations, individuals).
- III. Sustainability and membership engagement: how these organisations reflect and tackle topics such as volunteer turnover, member engagement and attraction, and continuity of purpose and involvement.



4. Methodology

The research employs a qualitative methodology, having used a semi-structured online focus group⁵ with pre-determined questions as the core technique of the study. This methodology was chosen to further contribute to literature on science diaspora networks, which includes a recent study that explored the organisational characteristics, as well as the goals and objectives of different diasporas by interviewing their managers⁶. The current study builds on this work to specifically highlight the unique case of EU science diaspora organisations based in the UK, with the use of the focus group further allowing participants to create a space for discussion and peer exchange, reflecting on their practices, comparing experiences, and collaboratively exploring solutions⁷.

4.1. A focus group: the CONNECTS-UK 4th diaspora meeting

This particular focus group was delivered as part of capacity-building and knowledge exchange meetings, known as "EU Diaspora Meetings," held within the CONNECTS-UK initiative. While CONNECTS-UK typically held these meetings as informal spaces for discussion and networking among diaspora organisations and science diplomats from member state embassies, this particular instance was intentionally designed as a research technique.

A single 90-minute online focus group was conducted, bringing together 15 invited representatives from several EU research diaspora organisations from the CONNECTS-UK network. The organisations that participated in the discussion included:

- The Austro-UK Science Alliance (AUKSA) - **Austria**
- Association Penkala - **Croatia**
- NEPOMAK - **Cyprus**
- French Education and Research Network in the UK (FERN-UK) - **France**
- The Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students (DOSZ) - **Hungary**
- Association of Italian Scientists in the UK (AISUK) - **Italy**
- Association of Latvian Students and Researchers in the UK (ALSRUK) - **Latvia**
- Dutch Network of Academics in the UK (DNU in UK) - **The Netherlands**
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- Association of Slovenians Educated Abroad (VTIS) - **Slovenia**
- Ukrainian-British Academic Society (UBAS) - **Ukraine**

⁵ The online focus group took place on June 17th 2025.

⁶ Butler et al., "Science Diaspora Networks".

⁷ Freeman, Tim, "'Best practice' in focus group research: making sense of different views", *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 56(5), 496, 2006. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17078825/>

The discussion was structured around pre-shared prompts (see Annex II) covering key themes including professionalisation, funding strategies, and sustainability and membership engagement. Ethical considerations were addressed by providing a research registration form that outlined the study's purpose and ethical guidelines, requiring participant approval for engagement and recorded analysis. All data collection and handling procedures adhered to GDPR guidelines. The session was audio-recorded to enable thorough transcription.

The analysis employed on the data collected in this focus group uses inductive thematic analysis. Inductive thematic analysis aims to identify the main themes as they arise and are discussed among the participants, observing and acknowledging their own interventions, how they attribute meaning and make associations⁸. This approach allows for patterns to emerge organically from the data rather than being imposed a priori, ensuring that the findings remain grounded in the participants' experiences and reflections. Additionally, the analysis also implements a deductive component: while the principal insights derive from participants' contributions, interpretation is also informed by existing knowledge of the functioning of research diaspora organisations and by relevant literature. This combined approach allows the findings to reflect participants' perspectives while situating them within a coherent analytical framework that accounts for broader organisational dynamics.

4.2. An important note on methodology and purpose

The findings of this study, drawn from a single focus group, should not be interpreted as providing a comprehensive or systematic comparison of all EU research diaspora organisations in the United Kingdom. These organisations differ in their size, membership base, duration of activity, and institutional trajectories, as well as in whether they emerged through bottom-up or top-down initiatives, with varying support from embassies and other institutions. For this reason, the analysis presented here captures the themes that emerged in the context of this particular discussion, and the issues highlighted should be understood as those raised by participants in that setting rather than as challenges universally experienced by all organisations.

At the same time, the diversity of organisations represented in the focus group, which are all positioned at different stages of professionalisation, funding, and sustainability, gives weight to the commonalities identified. The purpose of this study is not to map the full range of organisational trajectories, but rather to draw attention to the intersections: the recurring dilemmas, shared challenges, and cross-cutting themes that characterise the experience of EU research diaspora organisations more broadly. These dynamics may manifest differently across associations depending on their histories, structures, and resources, yet they nonetheless provide valuable insight into the factors that shape their organisational development and sustainability.

⁸ Proudfoot, Kevin, Inductive/Deductive Hybrid Thematic Analysis in Mixed Methods Research, *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 17(3), 311, 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/15586898221126816>

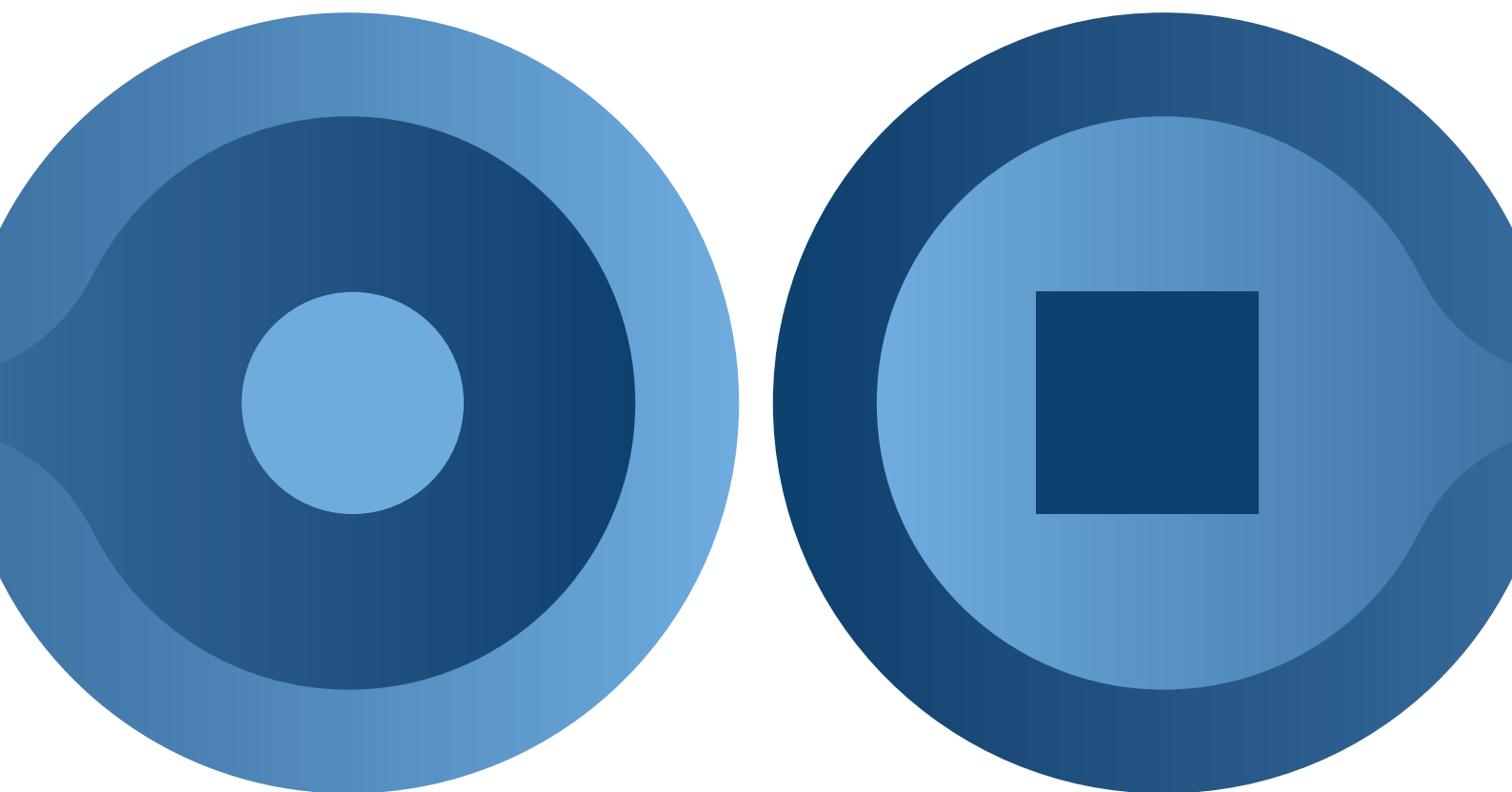
5. Analysis and Results

The three areas tackled in this focus group were I) professionalisation; II) funding strategies; III) sustainability and membership engagement. The analysis gathers several topics and concepts that were discussed, showcasing tables for each of the themes. Each table distinguishes between convergent practices, which reflect approaches shared by most organisations, and divergent practices, which illustrate the variety of strategies, ideas, or experiences unique to particular contexts. To strengthen the analysis, excerpts from the focus group discussions are included as supporting evidence, highlighting how participants articulated their practices and perspectives.

5.1. Professionalisation

Professionalisation is related to how organisations formalise structures and organisational charts, develop internal decision-making processes, engage with external stakeholders, make themselves visible and influential in the scientific and diplomatic context, and utilise resources, tools or strategies to enhance productivity and reach.

The EU research diaspora organisations in the UK offer a thorough and diverse portrait of what professionalisation means and entails, with the main recurring themes referring to volunteerism, organisational structure/identity, inter-organisational collaboration, and growth.



• Volunteerism

These organisations are characterised by the *central role of volunteers*, who are members that become actively involved in leading and organising initiatives. Highly engaged volunteers tend to form a small and self-driven core group and often hold the executive roles in the organisational chart. Their involvement entails envisioning and initiating activities as well as carrying the workload that comes with developing and implementing them. Since not all members become active volunteers, this core group is usually at high risk of becoming over-worked and burned out as they try to balance schedules and responsibilities between their professional lives and their volunteering role.

Given that the workload to ensure continuity of activities requires a large time commitment from volunteers, several of these organisations consider that a crucial step to professionalisation is associated with the *inclusion of paid professional support* for administrative and operational tasks. These paid positions are seen as an opportunity that frees up time for highly engaged volunteers, reinstating a flexible and motivation-oriented involvement. For large organisations with a high volume of administrative work (e.g. answering emails, handling budgets, writing grants) this step can be pivotal, as it allows volunteers to remain strategic and creative in their roles, leading the development of the initiatives without needing to handle and work on every task.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Convergent practices | Core group of highly engaged volunteers |
| Data | <i>"Not all members volunteer to run the day-to-day of the association"</i> |
| | <i>"One volunteer said 'I will just start a podcast'. [And we said] 'we will support the podcast, we will give you the resources [...] but you will do all the work'"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From employing paid administrative/operational staff to ease volunteer workload, to remaining entirely volunteer-run, creating differing levels of sustainability and burnout risk |
| Data | <i>"We've already seen how useful is having someone working for the company that can help us with [...] critical work that [...] we can now delegate to someone"</i> |
| | <i>"[...] to have permanent staff on hand. I think this is going to be a big one for ensuring a more sustainable workflow [...] we are all volunteers [...], so time is always a problem"</i> |

Table 1. Volunteerism.

- **Organisational structure/identity**

These organisations frequently operate through a *dual structure/identity*: a formal structure/identity and an internal structure/identity. The formal structure/identity is manifested through the status of “registered company” that these organisations generally hold, a formalised legal status that allows access to bureaucratic processes (e.g. applying for grants, paying taxes) that are needed to carry out their activities. Furthermore, this formal aspect is also reflected in the development of organisational charts and decision-making procedures which allocate roles (e.g. President of the Executive Board), responsibilities (e.g. coordination of Science Diplomacy Department), and tasks (e.g. managing the inbox of social media channels) to the volunteers within the members of the network. The internal structure/identity is characterised by the volunteer-driven operational core that sustains the activity of the organisation, normally including flexible dynamics and informal communication among members.

Professionalisation tends to be understood by these organisations as a need for stable structures from which to increase the visibility and recognition of the community, as well as gain access to resources to execute their initiatives and influence external stakeholders. However, this can potentially generate tensions with their inherent grassroots approach, through which members of the organisation act as volunteers and organise activities with variable degrees of involvement, keeping participation flexible and subject to individual motivation, proactiveness, and interest. This reflects a tension between *external recognition and internal dynamics*.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Dual structure, combining a formal identity for external legitimacy with an informal, volunteer-led internal dynamic |
| Data | <i>"We are professional in the sense that we are a fully registered company [...] we have formally appointed directors in that company"</i> |
| | <i>"We are all volunteers regardless of our status in the association"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From having minimal structure to detailed organisational charts and role definitions, with tension arising between formal structures and grassroots culture |
| Data | <i>"The big struggle that we keep having is that being completely professionally organised on papers is one thing, but it is also important to get enough dynamism in your organisation"</i> |

Table 2. Organisational structure/identity.

● Inter-organisational collaboration

One of the values in which these organisations are rooted is *collaboration*. Therefore, professionalisation often is not only envisioned as an internal process but as an ongoing effort to seek like-minded collaborators from which to learn and create partnerships. The EU research diaspora organisations in the UK usually partner up with “sister” organisations that share their challenges and interests: either national research diaspora organisations from other EU countries that are based in the UK (e.g. a partnership between the research diaspora organisation of Portugal in the UK and the research diaspora organisation of France in the UK) or national research diaspora organisations from their own home countries that are based in other countries (e.g. a partnership between the research diaspora organisation of Spain in the UK and the research diaspora of Spain in China).

This *alignment and consistency* between organisations can drive professionalisation by promoting capacity building, knowledge sharing, as well as sharing practical resources and tools (e.g. share a Zoom licence). Furthermore, it allows them to achieve critical mass and act jointly to pursue engagement and increase their visibility towards external stakeholders, such as government administrations and embassies. This is the case for the project CONNECTS-UK (network of several national research diasporas from different EU members states that are based in the UK), global research diaspora organisations such as Polonium Foundation (organisation for the Polish research diaspora around the world) or global research networks such as RAICEX (network of several Spanish research diaspora organisations around the world).

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Collaborative relationships with “sister” organisations and networks, aligning activities, messages, and initiatives |
| Data | <i>"We're going to work together a lot more with sister organisations"</i> |
| | <i>"The work, the collaboration with other diaspora associations from Europe I find it is very relevant and important to maintain"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From maintaining consistent partnerships, to just working sporadically with limited coordination or goal alignment |
| Data | <i>"It's not always easy to understand how the other organisations work"</i> |
| | <i>"The problem for us for local events is that we are too diluted"</i> |
| | <i>"I'd like to say that like other organisations, we have our struggles, so CONNECTS-UK helps us to feel less alone"</i> |

Table 3. Inter-organisational collaboration.

- **Growth**

Given the grassroots approach that most of these organisations are founded upon, their growth usually follows a *decentralised logic*, both in terms of location, with groups of highly engaged members emerging in different parts of the UK (e.g. local constituencies), and in terms of thematic focus, with volunteers proposing new issues or initiatives to pursue (e.g. science policy, neuroscience). Similarly, this confers the organisation a flatter and flexible structure, where leadership is shared and distributed.

However, this organic growth can reveal gaps between active and passive members, and generate asymmetries between subgroups of the organisation with strong and consistent leadership and those that are more dependent on key individuals to generate momentum. For this reason, while it remains important for volunteers to actively and closely steer the growth and mission of the organisations, most of these organisations have also professionalised through the implementation of centralised oversight instruments, allowing for *fluid coordination* and a consistent level of work across all subgroups. These include in some cases the centralisation of social media communication and other areas within the organisation’s activity, regular meetings among members that hold executive positions, or general supervision from institutions, such as embassies.

| | |
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| Convergent practices | Decentralised growth model with flexible coordination across local or thematic clusters |
| Data | <i>"Individual initiatives that started growing and then became a department"</i> |
| | <i>"We started to create these clusters, these communities, these constituencies, in different cities in the UK. [...] the constituencies are positive as they are independent to organise their own events"</i> |
| | <i>"This is really important - try to identify someone in [the constituency] that wants to be the director of the constituency, that will be the point of contact between the central team and the constituency, [...] and the responsible person of that cluster"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From ensuring fluid coordination to experiencing uneven performance between subgroups due to changes in leadership |
| Data | <i>"We're losing some of these clusters. For example, we used to have one very active in Yorkshire. Now it's not the case anymore because the people out there left the country or they stopped having time to give it to the association"</i> |
| | <i>"Some of the aspects, for example, a communication and online presence, we wanted it to be more coordinated"</i> |
| | <i>"The embassy helped convene the board, helped grow the board, hosted meetings and so on"</i> |
| | <i>"Not all members volunteer to running the day-to-day of the association"</i> |

Table 4. Growth.

5.2. Funding strategies

Funding strategies are related to the approaches that these organisations undertake to access financial resources at various levels (e.g. partnerships, sponsorships, grants, donations, fees) and from various sources (e.g. public institutions, private organisations, individuals).

The EU research diaspora organisations in the UK adopt a broad range of strategies to fund their activity, with the main recurring approaches involving institutional partnerships, activity-specific funding, membership fees, and a diversification of all the above.

- **Institutional partnerships**

The most desirable channel for funding for these organisations comes from having an *active and stable relationship with their corresponding embassies in the UK*. By having close contact with their embassy (often through their scientific attaché) in the UK, they can build their influence and request funding to support their activities. This generates a mutually beneficial exchange: the embassy offers sustained crucial resources for the organisations (e.g. funding, access to venues, external recognition), and the organisations contribute to the embassy’s work by providing access to diaspora members’ expertise and supporting science diplomacy efforts, in many cases serving as science policy advisory and offering a wide and useful network for their country’s diplomats.

In some cases, the organisations also look to engage and get a stable influx of institutional funding from ministries back in their home country, especially targeting education or science ministries. Although these institutional partnerships serve to maximise the organisation’s visibility, they can also pose a *high dependency risk*. By solely relying on one key source of funding, they are exposed to the consequences of the institution’s staff turnover or shifts in strategic and political priorities, which could potentially translate into sudden funding cuts or changes in support. This can be deeply discouraging for volunteers and is especially relevant for organisations that have been formed following top-down processes.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Stable partnerships with embassies or ministries, gaining resources, legitimacy, and recognition |
| Data | "We got some funding at some point because we did some work for the embassy while there was no scientific attaché" |
| | "So there's an incentive of the embassy [when they are] especially structured around the fact that it's about connecting Austrian researchers back to Austria" |
| Divergent practices | From holding long-term institutional relationships, with high dependency that creates vulnerability to changes, to facing challenges in establishing these relationships |
| Data | "The problem that we've had is maybe being a bit too dependent on the embassy for their help" |
| | "Our strategic goal is to collaborate with our embassy and to find [...] a long term collaboration" |
| | "Our collaboration with the embassy was very helpful for our promotion" |
| | "It was a good thing that the embassy was so supportive, but over reliance meant that when the support is no longer there, then things can fall pretty quickly" |

Table 5. Institutional partnerships.

- **Activity-specific funding**

It is a widespread strategy for these organisations to seek activity-specific funding (e.g. grants) from a wide array of organisations, such as public institutions or private foundations, based in either their home country, the UK, or the EU. Moreover, in-kind funding through collaborations with higher education or science institutions, in many cases the institutions that association members are affiliated with, is also a popular choice that reduces costs. Although this is beneficial and allows for *swifter decision-making and delivery*, it lacks a strategic and long-term approach to sustaining the overall activities of the organisation.

Relatedly, seeking activity-specific funding for each one of the activities organised by the volunteers requires them to constantly chase or create these opportunities, having to stay on top of any newly available public or private grants. While gathering funding from different sources might enable higher independence in the execution of tasks and ownership of the initiatives, this is inherently *time-consuming*, ultimately resulting in potentially *unsustainable* long-term action and fundraising.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Convergent practices | Event-based funding for quick execution, complemented by diversified income sources to reduce risk |
| Data | <i>"We try to do events in collaboration [...] with our own universities. If I have to organise something, I can get a venue in my university free of charge"</i> |
| | <i>"We've been applying for grants on a national level with the government, for various different types of grants to build various different types of projects"</i> |
| | <i>"We kind of self-fund for our own events. But when it comes to [funding] travel, this is compartmentalised through the [...] ministry. [...] we wouldn't be able to do that by ourselves, at least not sustainably - we go to the government on those matters"</i> |
| | <i>"A good idea is to talk with the foundations either in the UK or your home countries that want to get that exposure in the UK to support researchers in a particular project"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From finding ad hoc funding as a source that allows independence to this becoming unsustainable due to the time burden of constant fundraising |
| Data | <i>"Those things actually require a lot of time like grants and stuff like that and just searching for them, let alone writing them"</i> |
| | <i>"Because it gives you the independence - once you get the grant, you just do it on your own and nobody is going to [...] bend you one way or another"</i> |

Table 6. Activity-specific funding.

● Membership fees

Most organisations have implemented a membership fee scheme, which mirrors models used by similar professional associations or bodies. However, the fee that is required tends to be *low* and thought of as *symbolic*. Since most of these organisations don't have a highly numerous membership base, the amount collected is often insufficient for generating operational funding.

Consequently, these organisations find themselves periodically discussing the options of either increasing fees to adequately fund activities, or lowering the fees to attract more potential members, even to the point of eliminating them to be completely inclusive. However, both options create risks, the former by limiting the funds required for stable activity and organisational capacity and the latter by potentially disengaging members if they believe the organisation's activities are not on par with the cost of the membership. Thus, membership fees can be seen as a topic of *persistent tension*, where the meaning of becoming members of the network may be attached to the value of affiliation alone or to the value of the organisation's initiatives and offerings to members.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Membership fees are low or symbolic to ensure inclusivity |
| Data | "We have a symbolic £5 membership fee that is a one-off" |
| | "Whenever we try to do something with £10 per person, you can't do anything. It's not enough" |
| Divergent practices | From raising fees for operational capacity, to prioritising inclusivity by eliminating them, creating persistent tension over value vs. accessibility |
| Data | "You can increase your membership fees a lot at the risk that you're going to lose members and that your members are going to think that what you organise is not worth the increased membership fees. Or you decide that you are not going to ask for membership fees and then you still can't do anything, but at least you've not been asking people for money" |
| | "Thinking [about] what our members want. Most of them want to go to an event at the embassy. So we're going to organise events at the embassy that are for members only" |

Table 7. Membership fees.

- **Diversification of strategies**

Many organisations adopt a *diversified approach to funding strategies*, in an effort to reduce overreliance on embassies or collecting low, symbolic membership fees. This diversified approach is similar to the strategy other professional networks follow but remains unevenly implemented across EU research diaspora organisations.

Some focus especially on applying for public sector grants, gaining support from their countries of origin and leveraging diaspora connections to access targeted funding streams. Others pursue private sector sponsorships, particularly from companies and foundations interested in brand visibility, access to talent, or alignment with innovation and migration agendas. Another option are donation-based models, where individuals and institutions contribute financially when they perceive value in the organisation’s work or wish to express a sense of belonging via being donors.

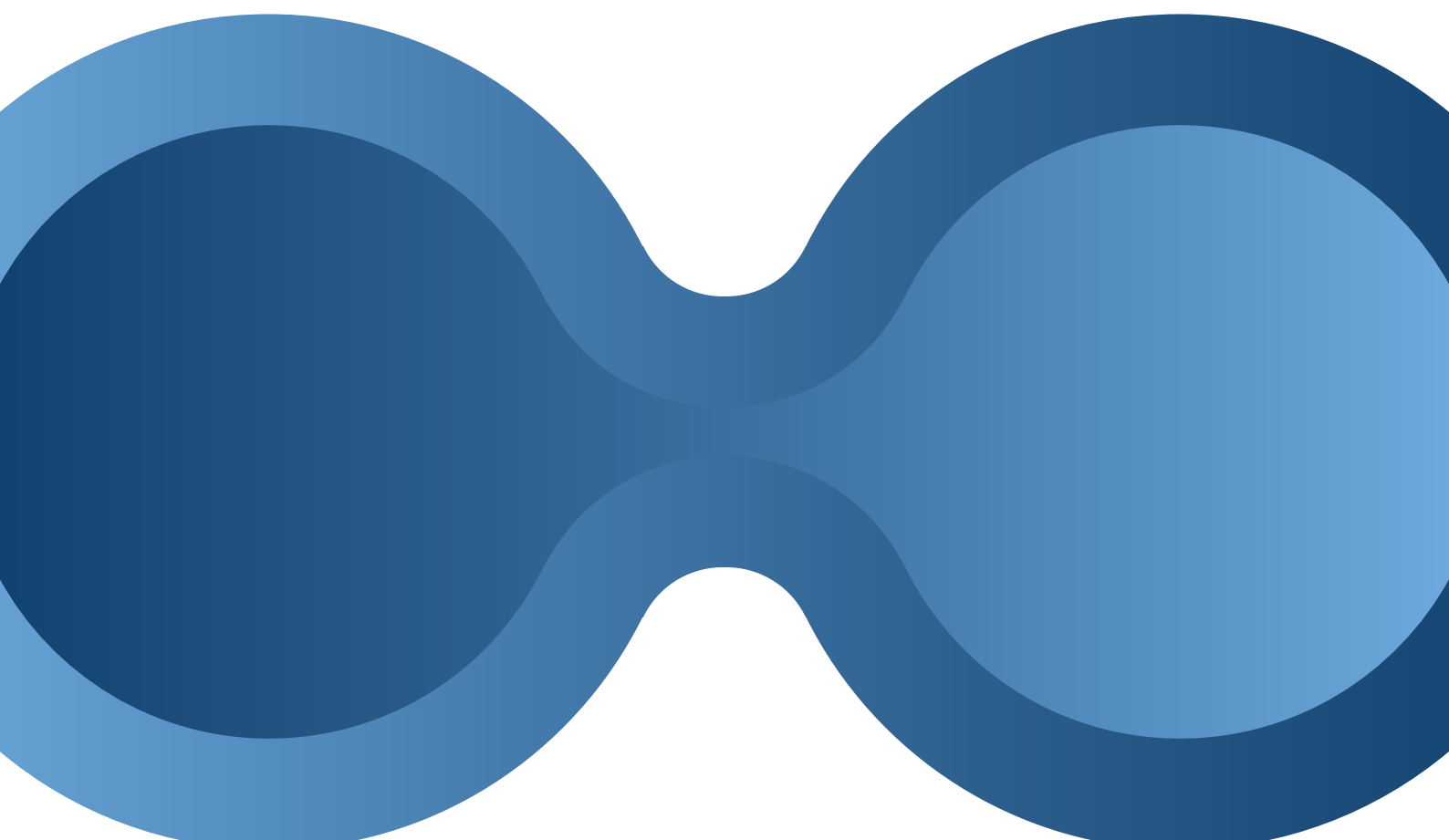
| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Convergent practices | Combination multiple sources (public grants, sponsorships, donations) to reduce dependency risk |
| Data | <i>"We have tried various ways of funding and there isn't any particular sponsorship or partnership that changed the way we function"</i> |
| | <i>"A good idea is to talk with the [private] foundations either in the UK or in your home countries that want to get that exposure in the UK to support researchers"</i> |
| | <i>"I would encourage every association to first look for opportunities available and offered by your country's foreign ministry. [...] Secondly, not necessarily only foreign ministry. Perhaps also research ministry or education ministry. Start [to look for] already available funds"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From having diversified strategies to depending heavily on one or two sources |
| Data | <i>"Everything that we have done has always been sponsored by the embassy"</i> |
| | <i>"Understanding the interests of the different stakeholders and the networks that you have around your organisation; it's important to know where to go to secure funding"</i> |

Table 8. Diversification.

5.3. Sustainability and membership engagement

Sustainability and membership engagement refer to how these organisations reflect and manage volunteer turnover, member engagement and attraction, and continuity of purpose and involvement. These reflections are of crucial importance for the EU research diaspora organisations in the UK, given how the declining proportion of EU researchers working in UK higher education⁹ in the post-Brexit scenario poses a challenge to the growth and continuity of their networks.

The EU research diaspora organisations in the UK envision the sustainability of their organisations, as well as the efforts to consistently engage members, by reflecting on aspects such as structural continuity, generational transition, value-driven engagement, and organisational positioning.



⁹ “Table 24 - HE Staff by HE Provider and Nationality 2014/15 to 2023/24,” Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/location#nationality>

• Structural continuity

In order to ensure organisational continuity and stable delivery of activities, these organisations tend to give crucial importance to the construction of *institutional memory*. This construction of institutional memory is often achieved through *simultaneously robust and flexible frameworks*, with models that allow for both proactive creativity that leads to the organic formation of departments or key subgroups as well as rotating leadership where responsibilities remain clear, consistent, and accountable. Given the high volunteer turnover that characterises these organisations, which can shift key elements such as individual proactiveness and organisational momentum, the focus on transferring the collective knowledge and experiences, especially to new leadership, is essential for the organisation to remain active and engaged.

Thus, when local constituencies or departmental groups change or dissolve when leaders depart, some organisations reassert stability by *empowering alumni*, encouraging them to have a different space within the organisation, in many cases by acting as advisors or mentors, or by leveraging the contacts made in their past leadership role. In this sense, the organisation ensures the use of established networks to continue to pursue funding and collaborations.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Convergent practices | Institutional memory is preserved through alumni involvement and adaptable frameworks |
| Data | <i>"That's not sustainable because in the end volunteers come and go. Volunteers also have specific priorities"</i> |
| | <i>"Some alumni, or some past members of the organisation [...] stay connected and ready to help. And through them, we are able to gain access to more networks"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From having structured handover plans to relying only on informal knowledge transfer, which can be vulnerable when new generations are taking over |
| Data | <i>"Our membership is constantly changing. So there are students coming, students leaving, young professionals coming, some professionals leaving. It's not that we'd have some senior members on board, so it's a struggle to have the volunteers, workforce and also engagement with our events as high as it used to be"</i> |
| | <i>On creating a constituency: "What we do, it's in our bylaws. [...] They have to register as a member of the society [...]. They need to come together and need a group of 10 of them. And then they just need to write a document that we have prepared and our board of directors needs to approve it."</i> |

Table 9. Structural continuity.

● Generational transition

Many of these organisations, especially the ones that have been active for a long time, have dealt with generational transitions, when senior researchers that may have limited time to contribute to daily operations handover the leadership to more junior members, that often bring higher availability, motivation, and fresh perspectives to the initiatives and the organisation’s direction. Fostering valuable connections throughout these handovers, as well as fostering *intergenerational engagement*, becomes essential for the sustainability of the networks.

While the continuous involvement of experienced members lends the organisation legitimacy, access to wider professional networks, and a broad range of knowledge about how the organisation functions, it also becomes critical to *create entry points* for new voices. These entry points can be created by the volunteers themselves, relying on their own motivation and proactiveness to take on leadership and new initiatives. However, entry points can also be carefully crafted around the individual interests or professional development goals that prospective members might have. Thus, when this strategy is employed, it not only attracts new members, but also facilitates smoother transitions into leadership, where senior members act as mentors of newer members, keeping the organisation inclusive and ensuring that each generation builds upon the strengths of the last.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Intergenerational engagement is valuable, creating opportunities for new participants |
| Data | <i>"We should engage more young researchers or people that have a bit more time and sort of hear them out and try to involve them"</i> |
| | <i>"It is very interesting to see that [the organisation] is led by very junior colleagues doing their PhD, their post docs, and having that mixture is also very rich and beneficial. It sends a message of collaboration and mentoring and safety"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From offering specific entry points and leadership renewal processes, to relying on more organic or proactive leadership processes |
| Data | <i>"Keeping it as decentralised as possible for people actually having the right entry points to actively participate"</i> |
| | <i>"Some of them also voiced their interest in leading some of the initiatives [...]. And so it grows very organically, step by step. [...]. The next very important step for us will be to really formalise those structures"</i> |

Table 10. Generational transition.

● Value-driven engagement

These organisations usually thrive when they are able to consistently provide value to their members. In many cases, stable involvement from members responds to them *perceiving personal and professional value* from their participation in the organisation’s activities and initiatives. Some of these benefits include: increased visibility, opportunities for networking, peer support, professional development, or a sense of belonging to the community.

In this sense, the majority of organisations design initiatives that are attractive and create tangible engagement: mentoring programmes, workshops, travel grants, networking and showcasing events, or award competitions. Ultimately, by focusing on value creation at the individual level, these organisations encourage *member retention and engagement*, strengthening the internal structure and in turn generating higher involvement from new members.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Retention of members is based on offering personal and professional value, such as networking and skill-building |
| Data | <i>“In terms of giving opportunities to members and trying to bring more members, we do try to bring activities or opportunities that matter the most for our members”</i> |
| | <i>“When you know that an association has a place for everyone, it’s easy to talk to your PhD students and let them know that [...] these opportunities and doing this type of work can be really fun. It allows you also to explore the country, meet colleagues in a different way. So all of those are great ways to expand and diversify and engage”</i> |
| Divergent practices | From providing structured programmes like mentorships, to focusing just on informal networking, which can affect member retention |
| Data | <i>“We’re struggling with having the right kinds of initiatives towards our members [...] and try to bring something of value to them”</i> |
| | <i>“So they were there on the board for visibility and influence and traction, but that means that they don’t have a lot of time to dedicated to the organisation and thinking about the organisation, the future, the events”</i> |
| | <i>“We see in our membership that there are two spikes, one of them before our big event, [...] but also the other spike is when we open our travel grants”</i> |

Table 11. Value-driven engagement.

● Organisational positioning

A number of organisations pursue not only building an engaged and supportive community, but also positioning themselves as *key reference points* in national or international policy conversations. By adopting a more strategic approach, in many cases they develop policy work that is later useful when members represent and advocate for their community in policy discussions. Therefore, long-term sustainability is supported not only by internal cohesion but also by the organisation’s perceived credibility and visibility within broader professional and scientific ecosystems.

Fostering this external recognition might entail *aligning the organisation’s goals with the priorities of external stakeholders*, such as governments, academic institutions or policy bodies. Generally, these priorities range from supporting return migration, brain circulation, science diplomacy efforts, or enhancing visibility and mobility of researchers abroad. Creating a clear and recognisable brand and organisational identity not only broadens the organisation’s network, but may also open up potential avenues for new funding or partnerships. In doing so, they reinforce their role not just as communities of practice, but as recognised actors within the global research landscape.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Convergent practices | Aim to be considered reference points in their sector, aligning with stakeholder priorities |
| Data | <i>"Understanding the interests of the different stakeholders and the networks that you have around your organisations, it's important to know where to go to secure that funding"</i> |
| | <i>"Perhaps one of the long term goals of this is a bit different than other organisations. [...] it's to become the reference point when government decides on different things that affect education or industry jobs"</i> |
| | <i>"Some members are participating at government meetings"</i> |
| Divergent practices | From fostering proactive external engagement and advocacy, to focusing mainly on internal community building, leading to different levels of visibility and recognition |
| Data | <i>"Our long term goal is to just establish a vibrant global network of researchers"</i> |
| | <i>"So we'd really like to build a brand, that we're a valuable database of people who go abroad, get experience, get education, come back and have all these insights that could help the home country"</i> |

Table 12. Organisational positioning.

5.4. Synthesis of results: spectrum of stages

While all organisations share common challenges and goals, there is a broad range of models and actions they implement to tackle them. As noted in the Analysis and Results section, there are convergent and divergent practices among organisations.

The divergent practices simultaneously generate a spectrum of stages that contribute to varying levels of professionalisation, funding stability, and long-term sustainability, which is reflected in Table 13.

| Stage | Professionalisation | Funding strategies | Sustainability and membership engagement |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Stage 1: Informal, flexible, and vulnerable</p> | <p>Operating with little to no legal registration, these organisations are defined almost entirely by the common identity and motivation of their members. They are fully volunteer-driven, with tasks assigned informally, and collaborations occurring only occasionally, mainly for specific activities or events. Growth takes place spontaneously and locally, without a coordinated mission and activity. This flexibility keeps them adaptable but also fragile, as there is little clarity in roles, no centralised coordination, and minimal institutional ties.</p> | <p>Funding tends to be informal, episodic, and unstable. Many rely on symbolic or no membership fees, small ad hoc donations, or resources that come from members' own professional ties (e.g. availability for a venue through a member's university affiliation). Occasionally, they may align loosely with an institution for a specific project, but these connections are informal and short-term. Without a safe core budget, they remain highly dependent on the proactive involvement of a few key individuals and are vulnerable to sudden shifts in support.</p> | <p>Organisational memory is tied to individuals, making transitions difficult when people leave. Membership recruitment is sporadic and retention often limited to those with personal involvement in the group. Public visibility is minimal, and the lack of structured engagement generates risk for knowledge loss and burnout over time.</p> |
| <p>Stage 2: Dynamic, stable, and growing</p> | <p>These organisations have begun to formalise their structure, often securing some form of legal recognition and creating internal roles. Volunteer energy remains essential, but small paid administrative positions can help reduce workload. Partnerships are more regular and flexible, and there is coordination across locations while allowing for local autonomy. They achieve a balance between grassroots agility and the need for formal processes.</p> | <p>Funding comes from a mix of sources, including membership fees, grants, sponsorships, and partnerships. Some institutional agreements may provide recurring (but not fully secure) support for specific activities. While diversification is improving, there may still be overreliance on a few main funders. The challenge for these organisations is to balance inclusivity with the operational limits of available resources.</p> | <p>These organisations have adaptable frameworks and clearer handover or mentorship processes to enable smooth leadership transitions. Members begin to see both personal and professional benefits in participating, which improves retention. The organisation is recognised by key stakeholders and increasingly visible in relevant networks, though it is not yet seen as a reference within their sector.</p> |
| <p>Stage 3: Strong, resilient, and sustainable</p> | <p>At this stage, the organisation's internal identity and governance are fully aligned with its public identity. A sustainable mix of volunteers and paid staff can ensure operational stability. Strategic partnerships are long-term and may involve shared governance, allowing consistent coordination. The model supports both decentralisation and coherence.</p> | <p>Funding is balanced across several institutional relationships, with a stable stream that covers core costs. The income mix is sufficiently diversified and this independence allows long-term planning without constantly having to seek for grants.</p> | <p>Continuity is embedded in the organisation through leadership renewal process and intergenerational engagement. Member participation is deep, blending personal connection with professional value. The organisation is a recognised authority within its sector, trusted by stakeholders, and positioned as a reference point for best practices.</p> |

Table 13. Spectrum of stages for EU research diaspora organisations.

6. Conclusions: Best Practices and Recommendations

This section synthesises the key conclusions of the study into a set of best practices and recommendations designed to strengthen organisational resilience, volunteer engagement, and long-term sustainability. The proposed practices highlight the importance of balancing formal structures with flexibility, supporting volunteers through professionalised roles, fostering collaboration, and diversifying funding. Alongside each recommendation, practical steps are outlined to ensure that these strategies can be realistically implemented and adapted to different contexts. Together, these insights provide a roadmap for research diaspora organisations aiming to grow inclusively, retain motivated members, and maximise their impact.

1. Creating balance between the formal organisational structures and the volunteer participation model

Recommendation:

Gradually formalise roles and governance while preserving flexible and motivation-driven dynamics.

Practical steps:

- Develop organisational charts with defined roles.
- Create formal decision-making processes, such as governance meetings, but allow informal spaces for easy discussion of new initiatives, letting volunteers be creative.
- Regularly consult volunteers to maintain their engagement and ownership without strict and constant oversight.

2. Secure funding for administrative staff to handle operational tasks

Recommendation:

Supporting volunteers by integrating paid administrative roles to reduce burnout.

Practical steps:

- Identify key administrative tasks suitable for paid roles.
- Allocate budget or fundraising goals specifically for staffing.
- Recruit part-time or flexible staff to complement volunteer efforts.

3. Fostering consistent collaboration with sister organisations and networks

Recommendation:

Establish formal partnerships with regular communication channels.

Practical steps:

- Create a list of potential sister organisations and networks and identify the priorities for contact.
- Reach out and share calendars of events and initiatives, maintaining regular communication and promoting networking.
- Set up joint working groups or committees to co-organise events and initiatives.

4. Encouraging decentralised growth while maintaining coordination and leadership transition plans

Recommendation:

Implement specific mentorship and handover processes.

Practical steps:

- Develop formal onboarding guidelines for all the roles within the organisation.
- Pair experienced members with newcomers for mentoring.
- Schedule regular check-ins across local clusters.

5. Diversifying funding sources to reduce dependency on any single stream

Recommendation:

Develop a multi-source fundraising strategy.

Practical steps:

- Identify potential grants, sponsorships, partnerships, and membership fee models.
- Create targeted proposals for different funders.
- Track the contributions of different sources and adjust efforts.

6. Maintaining relatively low membership fees to ensure inclusivity

Recommendation:

Balance fee collection structure with other alternative funding streams.

Practical steps:

- Keep fees minimal to encourage broad participation.
- Consider having tiered memberships with different costs or overall optional membership fees if your organisation is still working on a fundraising strategy.
- Communicate transparently about financial needs to members.

7. Structuring knowledge transfer through handovers and alumni engagement

Recommendation:

Develop materials that document the organisation's work and reflect internal processes for leadership changes

Practical steps:

- Develop handover templates that reflect crucial information about leadership roles.
- Establish a member database that is regularly updated, categorising members systematically (e.g. member; active volunteer; leader; alumni).
- Encourage alumni participation in mentoring or advisory roles.

8. Engaging multiple generations to renew leadership and sustain momentum

Recommendation:

Facilitate intergenerational activities and leadership pathways.

Practical steps:

- Plan an engagement and attraction strategy to target both potential junior and senior members.
- Organise internal events or meetings that deliberately promote junior-senior members' interaction.
- Promote inclusive decision-making where all members are able to voice their opinions.

9. Providing members meaningful value through a range of activities

Recommendation:

Design initiatives that are aligned with the members' priorities, both personal and professional.

Practical steps:

- Conduct internal surveys to identify member needs and interests.
- Promote professional development initiatives that have a substantial added-value for members, especially in terms of funding and visibility: microgrants, mentorship programmes, or networking events with high-level stakeholders.
- Highlight success stories and member achievements publicly.

10. Building a strong and visible organisational brand aligned with stakeholder priorities

Recommendation:

Develop and implement a strategic communication and engagement plan.

Practical steps:

- Clarify organisational mission and how this is displayed across communication channels, both internal and external.
- Be active on social media, newsletters, attendance to important events and conferences.
- Engage stakeholders with regular updates and invitations to participate, with a special emphasis on common priorities.

7. Annexes

Annex I. Participating organisations and their general characteristics

| Organisation Name | The Austro-UK Science Alliance (AUKSA) | Association Penkala | French Education and Research Network in the UK (FERN-UK) | The Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students (DOSZ) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Country | Austria | Croatia | France | Hungary |
| Est. in | 2025 | 2017 | 2022 | 1995 |
| Number of Members | ~150 individual members in the UK; 15+ partner universities/research institutions. | 312 globally; 20 in the UK. | 300 | Members are by law all PhD candidates in Hungary, around 10.000. Connected with 10-15 researchers in the UK. |
| Management | Executive Board with two Executive Chairpeople; Advisory Board representing key bilateral stakeholders (Austrian Embassy London, Austrian Trade Commission UK, Austrian Business Agency, Austrian Cultural Forum London, ASCINA, alumni org. leads). | General board, with President, Vice president and Treasurer. | Board of directors. | Yearly elected board. |
| Number of departments/subgroups | None currently; local chapters in development (e.g., AUKSA London, Oxford, Cambridge, Scotland, South). | Thematic working groups (e.g., Science Diaspora Map, Open science, Mental Health in Academia events, podcast, round tables). | 1 | 20+ scientific departments, international ambassadors system with 40+ country ambassadors and 5 working groups. |
| Membership fees | Free membership for researchers. | Free membership. | Free membership. | Free membership. |
| Receives funding from the Embassy | Yes, limited to one-off support for specific events (when hosted at the embassy). | 2 temporary project fundings from THE British Embassy in Zagreb in the past 3 years; currently no funding. | For logistical support. | No. |
| Scope | Bilateral (Austria-UK); UK-based operations with Austrian partner network. | Global. | UK. | Global. |

| Organisation Name | Association of Italian Scientists in the UK (AISUK) | Dutch Network of Academics in the UK (DNA in UK) | Polonium Foundation | Portuguese Association of Researchers and Students in the UK (PARSUK) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Country | Italy | The Netherlands | Poland | Portugal |
| Est. in | 2015 | 2020 | 2016 | 2008 |
| Number of Members | ~800 | 140 | 14500 | 2515 cumulative members. |
| Management | Board of Directors. | Board of Directors. | Executive Team, Team Leaders, and Supervisory Board. | Executive Committee with 19 members. |
| Number of departments/ subgroups | No subgroups. Local representatives in 12 cities. | Regional subgroups. | 8 thematic and operational teams. | 4 departments: Members & Initiatives; Communications & Engagement; Science Diplomacy & External Affairs; Executive Coordination. |
| Membership fees | 5 GBP, one-off. | 10 GBP, one-off. | Free membership. | Students 5 EUR, Professionals 15 EUR (per year). |
| Receives funding from the Embassy | Not regularly. Two contracts with the Embassy for specific tasks in the past | Yes, as funding for specific events. | Yes | Support in-kind from the Embassy (e.g. venue for events) but no funding; funding from Portuguese government associations/funding agencies. |
| Scope | UK. | Since DNA UK, there are now other groups under the ministry of OCW (education, culture and science), such as DNA USA, DNA Germany, DNA France with plans to expand globally. | Global. | Global; members all over the world. |

| Organisation Name | Society of Spanish Researchers in the UK (SRUK/CERU) | Association of Slovenians Educated Abroad (VTIS) | Ukrainian-British Academic Society (UBAS) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Country | Spain | Slovenia | Ukraine |
| Est. in | 2012 | 2013 | 2025 |
| Number of Members | 300 | 3000 globally, 430 in the UK. | 283 |
| Management | Board of Trustees and Executive Committee. | VTIS (global) has an executive board (7 volunteers with 2-year mandates, one of them is the president), a supervisory board (3 volunteers) and a consultative body (6 members) advising the executive board. VTIS UK has a chair and members volunteers. | Managed by a Board. |
| Number of departments/subgroups | Departments: 5, Constituencies: 6, Committees: 16. | 16 local committees, one of them being the UK; 10+ interest groups (not limited to UK-based members). | Thematic committees, including Research & Innovation, Career Development, Cultural & Community Initiatives, Funding & Partnerships, and Communications & Media. |
| Membership fees | Students 10 GBP, Junior Members 25 GBP, Senior Members 40 GBP. | Free membership. | Free membership. |
| Receives funding from the Embassy | Yes, on annual basis. | No; the embassy supports with space to host and catering for formal events. VTIS is financed by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad and by sponsors (companies, institutions, partners). | Close collaboration with the Embassy of Ukraine in the UK, but no constant funding from embassy. |
| Scope | UK; also part of RAICEX, a global network connecting researchers of Spanish origin working outside of Spain. | Global. | UK; the scope is international through partnerships with British, Ukrainian, European, and global academic institutions. |

Annex II. Pre-shared prompts

Professionalisation

What does professionalisation mean for your organisation at this moment? Is it a structured organisation chart? Is it visibility and influence? Is it broadening your membership base?

What tools, collaborations, or strategies have helped you become more structured?

Have you adopted practices or learned from other diaspora organisations?

Funding strategies

What are your current funding sources and strategies?

What works well, and what hasn't? What barriers do you face when trying to secure funding?

Have you collaborated with others for funding? What obstacles/advantages does it offer?

Sustainability and mutual support

How do you sustain your organisation over time? What are your long-term goals and how do you discuss and action them in the present?

How do you encourage members to stay in the organisation and maintain the legacy?

What forms of mutual support exist among diaspora organisations, what are the main examples of collaboration, joint events, or resource sharing? CONNECTS-UK is one of them, others?

Recruitment and challenges

How do you identify and attract new members?

What are your main challenges internally or externally?

Are there systemic issues in the UK context you face?

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**Best Practices
and Recommendations
for the Sustainability
of EU Research Diaspora
Organisations in the UK**

Lessons from a focus group analysis
by CONNECTS-UK

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