

Understanding EU Research Diaspora Organisations: Science Diplomacy, Strategic Priorities, and Member Perspectives

**Insights from interviews
and survey analysis by CONNECTS-UK**

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- Polonium Foundation - **Poland**
- Portuguese Association of Researchers and Students in the UK (PARSUK) - **Portugal**
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2. Executive Summary

This study examines EU research diaspora organisations operating in the UK, exploring how they function, what drives their members, and how they engage with science diplomacy and policy processes. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey that gathered 77 responses from members of EU research diaspora organisation and semi-structured interviews with leaders from six of these organisations. Together, these methods capture both the strategic perspectives of organisational leaders and the experiences and realities of members. Below we summarise the main findings of the study drawing on the results of our analysis.

1. **Members join primarily seeking professional opportunities**, but their continued engagement is sustained by a **deeper sense of personal identification** with their organisation and community.
2. **Participation is largely intermittent** across the membership, with a **small core of highly committed volunteers** driving the delivery of most initiatives. This concentration of effort creates **organisational fragility, particularly during leadership transitions or periods of low volunteer capacity**.
3. **Activity prioritisation is shaped more by available human and material resources than by strategic planning**, meaning organisations tend to operate in cycles of high momentum and quieter consolidation rather than at a sustained pace.
4. **Science diplomacy and policy engagement** have emerged as a meaningful dimension of these organisations' work, with **three distinct models identifiable across the sector: expert advisory, advocacy, and visibility and bridge-building**. Most organisations move fluidly between these models.
5. **The scientific attaché is a pivotal figure** in enabling institutional access, but the reliance on personal relationships rather than formal frameworks introduces **vulnerability whenever diplomatic staff change or embassy priorities shift**.
6. A persistent **asymmetry exists between home-country and UK institutional engagement**: home-country actors recognise diaspora organisations as strategically relevant, while UK institutions tend to engage with individual researchers rather than with the organisations as collective actors.
7. **Inter-organisational collaboration and peer exchange enhances the development of newer organisations**, strengthening collective visibility and reducing duplication of effort.
8. **Structural factors beyond organisations' control**, such as the size of the national diaspora in the UK and the reach of the home country's diplomatic network, **create meaningful differences in what each organisation can realistically achieve** in terms of reach, partnerships, and policy influence.

3. 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. In addition, they increasingly operate at the intersection of research and policy, positioning themselves as relevant actors 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. Through their activities and networks, they create and maintain connections at local, national, and international levels, contributing both to global research excellence and to the visibility of their countries' scientific outputs, priorities, 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 active in the UK. The UK has historically been a major destination for European researchers³, making it a significant hub for transnational research mobility. However, the post-Brexit environment has introduced new challenges, including increased uncertainty around research funding frameworks, shifts in migration policy, and changes in institutional relationships⁴. Against this backdrop, EU research diaspora organisations in the UK play an important bridging role, fostering dialogue and cooperation between the governments of the EU and its member states and UK governmental institutions, research organisations, and civil society actors.

The present research study draws on in-depth interviews with volunteers and the results of a short survey questionnaire shared with members of EU research diaspora organisations. By foregrounding leadership and member perspectives, the study provides insights into how these organisations navigate evolving policy environments, define their strategic priorities, and contribute to science diplomacy, while also identifying the motivations and incentives that drive members engagement and participation.

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>.

4. Objective

The purpose of this study is to characterise the roles, strategic orientations, and activities of EU research diaspora organisations active in the United Kingdom. These organisations, built around shared nationality, connect researchers working abroad by promoting community building and peer support, facilitating scientific exchange, and representing diaspora perspectives within the research, policy, and science diplomacy landscapes of both the UK and their home countries in the EU.

The present research examines how these organisations define their strategic priorities, organise and allocate their activities, and respond to both structural and contextual challenges. Drawing on a short questionnaire administered to members and in-depth interviews with volunteers involved in leading these organisations, the study aims to generate practical insights and identify best practices to support the future development, positioning, and sustainability of EU research diaspora organisations in the UK.

In particular, the core areas of focus address the following dimensions:

- I. **Membership, participation, barriers, and community building:** how members' motivations for joining research diaspora organisations relate to networking, professional development, cultural belonging, and community building; how participation and engagement vary over time; and how organisations reflect on and address barriers such as time constraints, leadership opportunities, and continuity of involvement.
- II. **Strategy, activities, and prioritisation:** how these organisations define and balance their strategic objectives, allocate resources between member-focused and external-facing activities, and prioritise different types of initiatives in response to members' needs, organisational capacity, and evolving political and research policy environments.
- III. **Science diplomacy and policy engagement:** how EU research diaspora organisations engage, formally or informally, with embassies, UK-based institutions, and home-country (EU member state) policy stakeholders; how they understand their role within science diplomacy ecosystems; and how their resources and efforts are distributed across different policy and diplomatic engagement pathways.
- IV. **Inter-organisational collaboration:** how EU research diaspora organisations in the UK collaborate with one another, the purposes and forms of such collaboration, and the opportunities and challenges associated with collective action and shared representation within the broader European research and science diplomacy landscape.

5. Methodology

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative in-depth interviews with a short quantitative questionnaire as the core methods of the study. This methodology was chosen to further contribute to the literature on scientific diaspora networks, allowing for a more detailed exploration of organisational strategies, science diplomacy practices, and member experiences.

The qualitative component of the study consists of semi-structured online interviews conducted with volunteers involved in leading EU research diaspora organisations. Interviewees were members of leadership teams of the Society of Spanish Researchers in the UK (SRUK), the Portuguese Association of Researchers and Students in the UK (PARSUK), the Polonium Foundation, the Association of Italian Scientists in the UK (AISUK), the Dutch Network of Academics in the UK (DNA in UK), and the French Education and Research Network in the UK (FERN in UK). The interviews followed pre-defined prompts (see **Annex II**) covering organisational background, activity prioritisation, engagement with embassies, engagement with UK-based and home-country policy stakeholders, resource allocation, and collaboration with other EU research diaspora organisations. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and stored in accordance with the GDPR Act, to enable accurate transcription and analysis.

In parallel, a short questionnaire was designed to capture member-level perspectives across all EU research diaspora organisations (see Annex I). Themes were selected to reflect key dimensions of membership experience and to generate evidence relevant to organisational development and community building. The target population consisted of members of EU research diaspora organisations active in the UK. This short questionnaire was part of the wider survey disseminated by CONNECTS-UK as part of the report "[The Experiences, Challenges, and Perceptions of EU Researchers in the UK in the Post-Brexit Landscape](#)". Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. A total of 77 responses were collected and included in the analysis.

As part of the data collection process, CONNECTS-UK collaborated closely with Dr Itegbeyogene (P.) Ezekiel, an independent researcher and external collaborator, to enhance understanding of EU research diasporas in the UK through shared expertise, anonymised data exchange, and joint research efforts. Research results were shared between the two parties following strict ethical research standards and data protection policies.

The data analysis combines inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts with descriptive analysis of the questionnaire responses. The qualitative analysis allows themes to emerge from participants' reflections, while the interpretation is informed by existing knowledge of research diaspora organisations and relevant literature on science diplomacy and transnational research collaboration.

5.1. An important note on methodology and purpose

The findings of this study, drawn from a limited number of in-depth interviews and a non-representative questionnaire sample, should not be interpreted as providing a comprehensive or systematic overview of all EU research diaspora organisations in the United Kingdom. The interviews reflect a selection of key cases, each shaped by distinct organisational histories, capacities, and relationships with policy and diplomatic stakeholders, while the broader landscape of EU research diaspora organisations remains highly diverse.

At the same time, the variety of organisational contexts represented in this study provides valuable insights into recurring themes, shared challenges, and points of divergence. EU research diaspora organisations differ significantly in size, membership composition, stages of development, and modes of engagement, and each case reflects a distinct organisational trajectory. The purpose of this research is therefore not to generalise across all organisations, but to highlight common dynamics and intersections that contribute to understanding the evolving role of EU research diaspora organisations in the UK.

6. Analysis and Results

6.1. Membership, participation, barriers, and community building

This section examines the motivations, engagement patterns, and barriers that characterise membership in EU research diaspora organisations in the UK, exploring the interplay between professional drivers and more personal factors, including cultural belonging and peer support. The figures presented capture the overall trends across all survey respondents, reflecting the collective engagement landscape of EU research diaspora organisations as a whole. It is important to note, however, that a more granular analysis filtering by individual organisations might have meaningful differences, as these organisations are structurally varied in several key respects: their availability and frequency of activities and events, their stage of professionalisation, and their scale of membership. These structural differences mean that the same trends may carry different interpretations depending on which organisation is analysed.

6.1.1. The key incentives and benefits of membership

The members of the research diaspora organisations join these groups for several reasons. When prompted to choose the main motivations that attracted them to engage, we found that a large majority of respondents (88%) report *networking opportunities* as the main incentive to become members of their national research diaspora organisation (see **Figure 1**). This is followed by a *sense of cultural belonging* (69%) and *social events and community building* (56%). These results show that prospective members are primarily seeking connections with peers from their home countries, fostering a sense of community with people with whom they share origins and experiences. However, networking being considered as the most relevant factor hints at the fact that members' main purpose is the expansion of their professional networks. This implies that these organisations are perceived as effective platforms for exchanging contacts and information on professional opportunities, as well as for participating in activities that allow members to share space with peers.

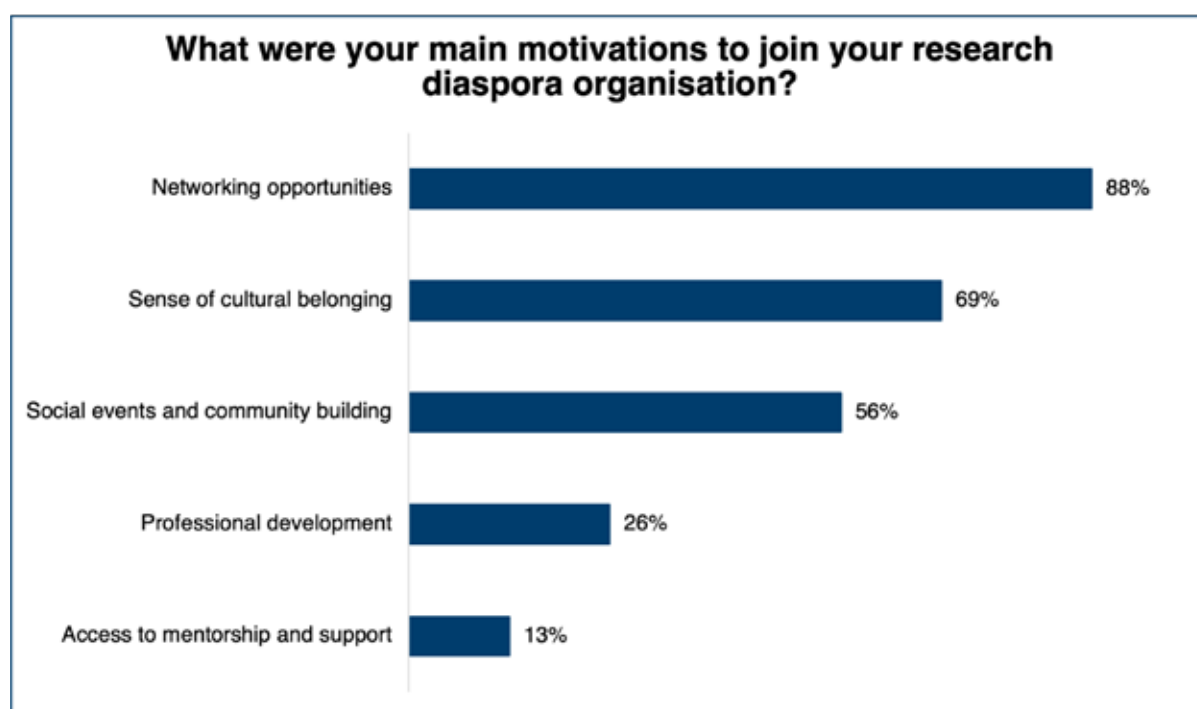


Figure 1. Main motivations to become a member of research diaspora organisations. Sample: 77

Furthermore, the engagement that members have with their research diaspora organisation can change in response to shifts in contextual factors, such as political or policy developments. An example is how Brexit and its consequences for EU-UK research and scientific relations created uncertainty around access to research funding and international mobility, deeply affecting EU researchers living in the UK. For this reason, respondents were asked how political or policy developments have shaped their involvement in their organisations. The results show that 53% of members report becoming more involved as a result of such developments (see **Figure 2**), indicating that contextual factors clearly influence how members perceive and engage with their organisations. In this sense, developments such as Brexit might have created a more explicit need for members to turn to their research diaspora organisations, viewing them as communities where they can seek support, information, and reassurance. Nonetheless, it is important to note that 31% of respondents reported that political and policy developments have not generated any impact in their involvement. The rationale for this could be that some members might be leaders or already consistently active within their organisations, thereby contextual factors would play a minimal role in how much they get involved.

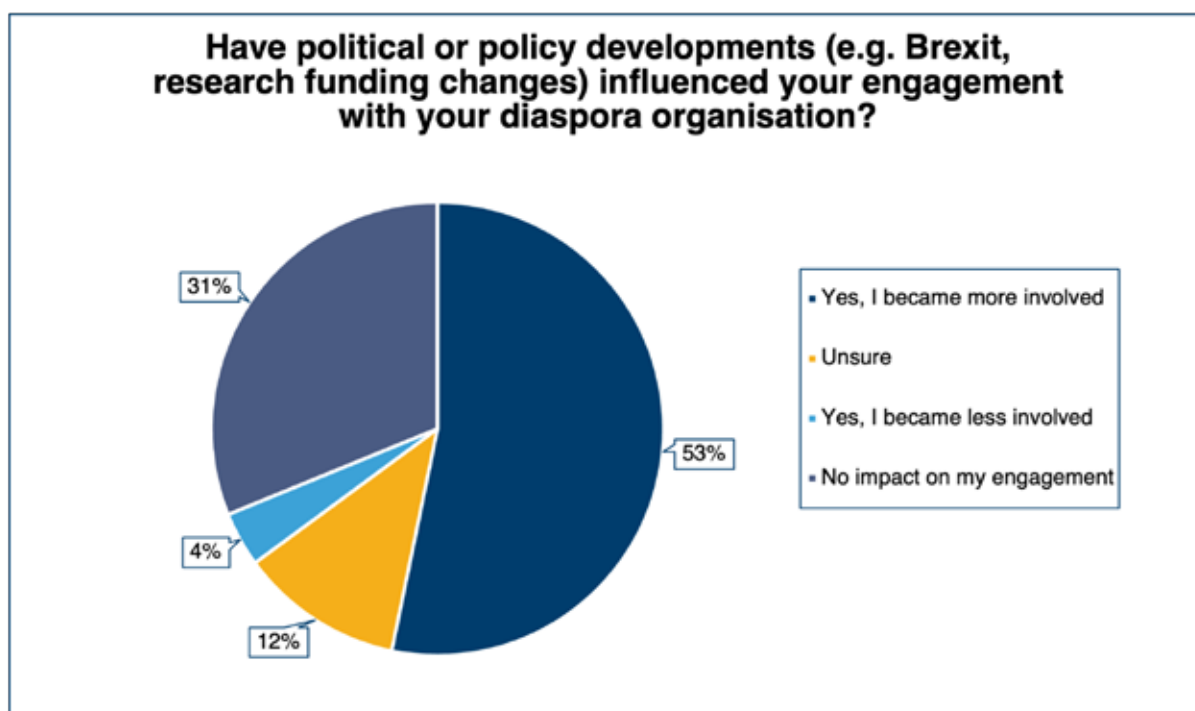


Figure 2. Influence of political or policy developments in member engagement. Sample: 77

Lastly, we also asked the members of research diaspora organisations to indicate what tangible benefits they have experienced as a result of being engaged with their organisations. **Figure 3** reveals that *increased professional networks, contacts, and opportunities* is considered the most relevant benefit gained from being a member of a research diaspora organisation, selected by 53% of the sample. This is followed by *increased personal and community informal relationships*, selected by 40% of the example. These results mirror the ones shown in **Figure 1**, demonstrating that the incentives that are perceived by prospective members when deciding to join the organisation match the actual benefits that can be experienced by getting involved. Other benefits reported are *volunteering work that complements my CV* (27%) and *access to policy discussions/actors* (26%).

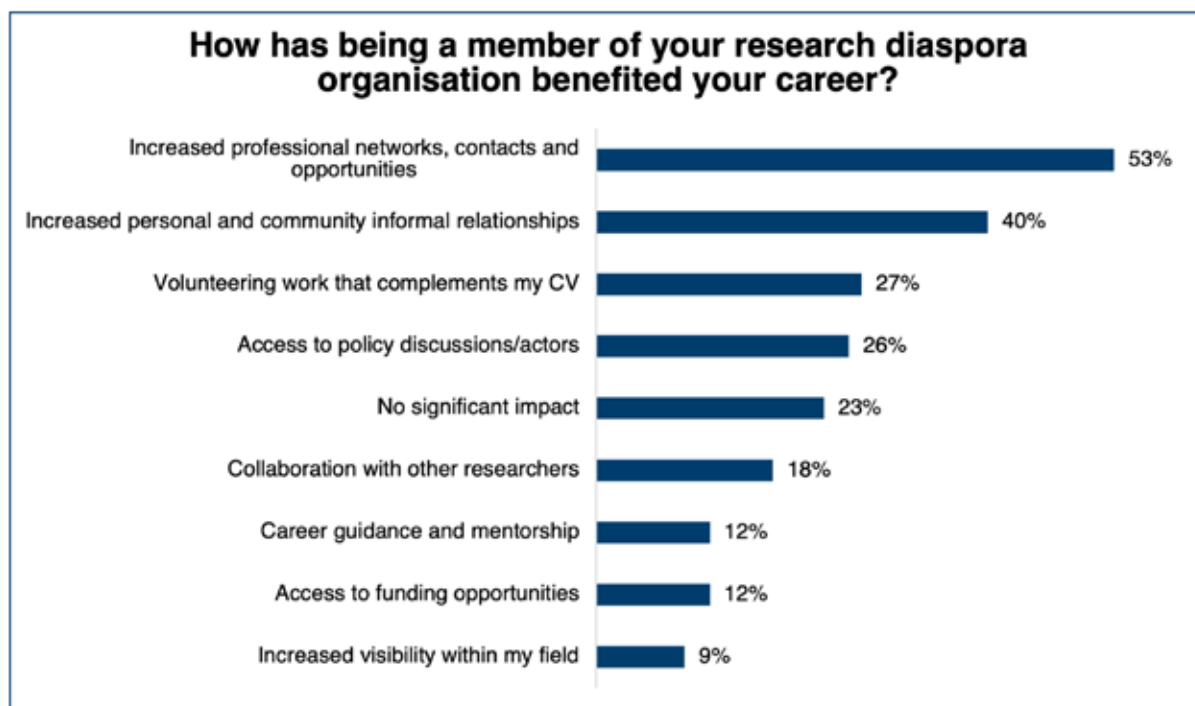


Figure 3. Main benefits gained from being a member of research diaspora organisations. Sample: 77

6.1.2. The dynamics of participation and community-building

One of the biggest challenges research diaspora organisations face is managing member participation in organisational activities. Participation in these organisations generally takes two forms: first, the participation by members who become volunteers and help envision, lead, and deliver initiatives; and second, the participation by members who support the organisation by attending or engaging with member-focused activities. For research diaspora organisations, it is important both to engage members in the running of the organisation and to ensure that their initiatives are serving their community.

Because these communities function through the volunteering work of their members, and their availability can change, the organisations' internal dynamics can also potentially shift. Furthermore, internal dynamics can be altered by the support and engagement for member-focused initiatives, which is dependent on the initiatives being interesting and catering to the needs of members, as well as the members' own effort and availability to engage. In this sense, when asked about the frequency of their participation (see **Figure 4**), almost 65% of members stated that they get involved either *rarely* or *occasionally*, while only 30% report being active either *regularly* or *very regularly*. These results might imply that most members have an occasional approach to participating, potentially engaging only with a certain type of event or activity that the organisation promotes, and that it might be a relatively small group of consistently active volunteers who lead the overall delivery of initiatives.

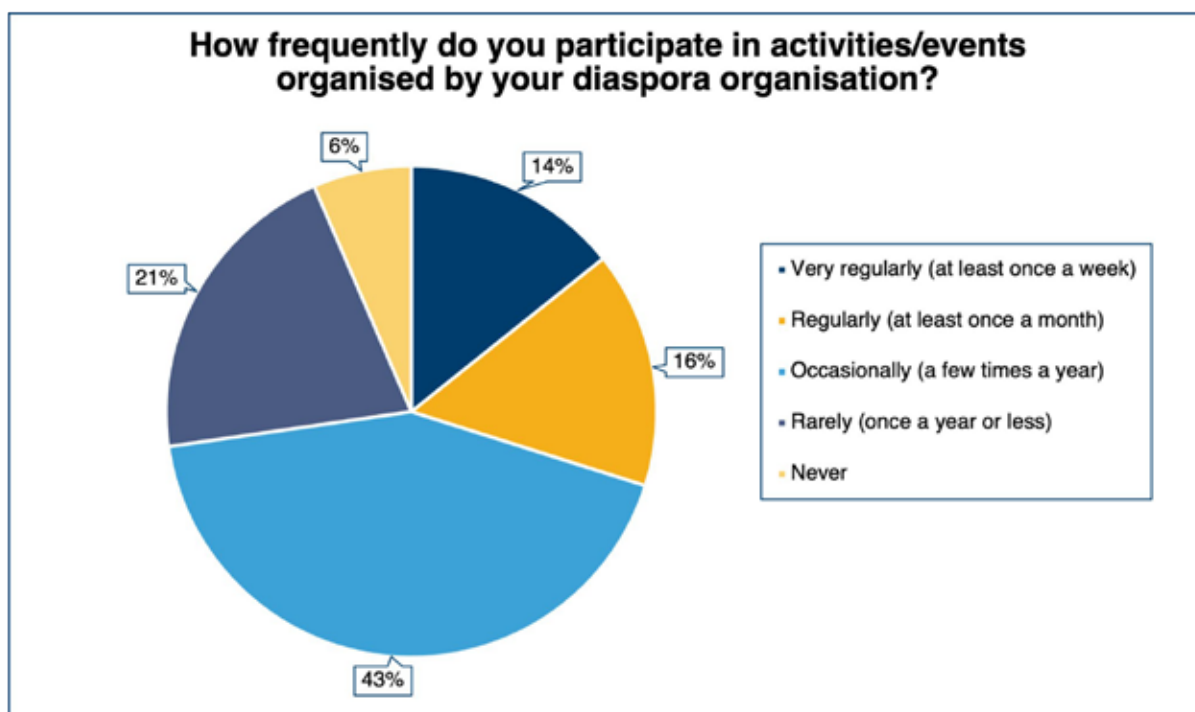


Figure 4. Frequency of participation in the organisation's activities. Sample: 77

While active and consistent participation is a channel used by a share of members to engage with their research diaspora organisation, it is possible to deduct from **Figure 1** and **Figure 3** that members' engagement with these organisations can sometimes just be rooted in a personal desire to connect with peers and feel part of a community. For this reason, we asked our respondents to declare the extent to which they agree with the statement "*I feel personally connected to my research diaspora organisation*". The results displayed in **Figure 5** show that a majority of almost 70% of members agree with the statement. This suggests that while members might prioritise or pursue different channels of engagement, as well as different motivations to participate, most of them carry a sense of connection and personal identification towards their organisation.

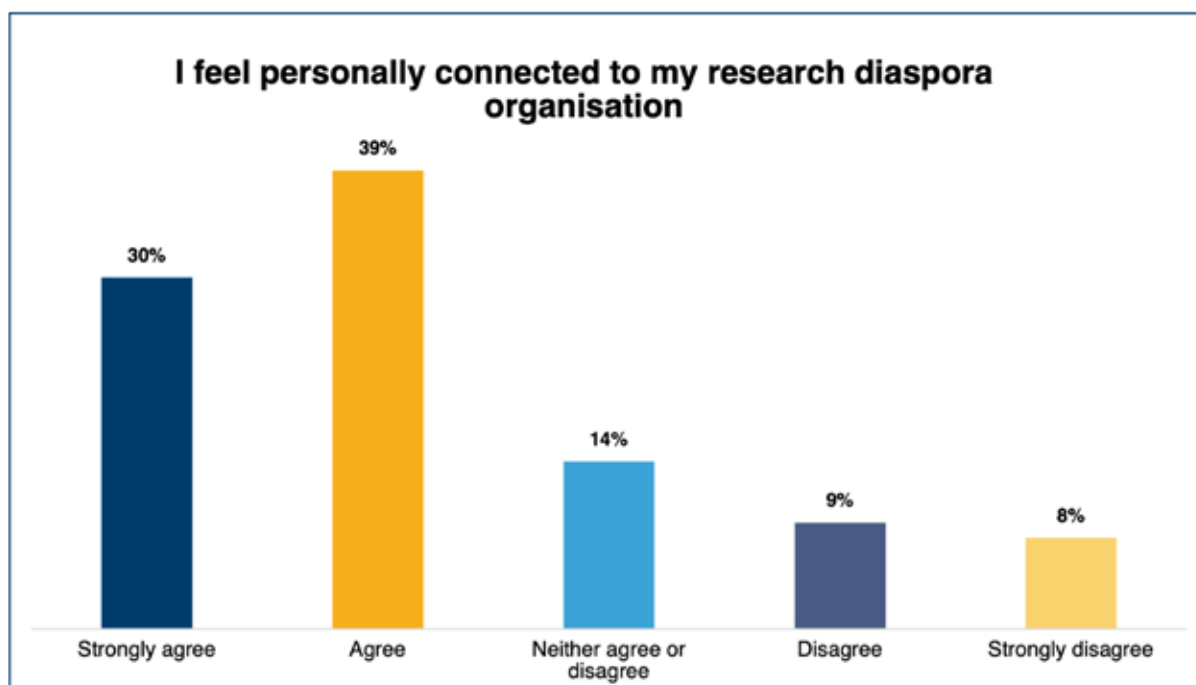


Figure 5. Personal connection with research diaspora organisation. Sample: 77

Lastly, the extent to which members are able to engage with their organisation's initiatives is subjected to certain factors and circumstances. Due to the voluntary nature of this participation, many of these circumstances can be defined as constraints that prevent members from becoming active volunteers, such as lack of time, lack of entry points for participation/leadership, or personal preferences in the type of engagement they desire to provide. Nonetheless, some factors might not be related to the members' circumstances, but instead be focused around the nature of the activities themselves, mainly their relevance for members' professional goals. When prompting our sample to declare which factor limits their participation the most (see **Figure 6**), a share of 70% acknowledges that the lack of time is the main barrier preventing them from engaging. This is followed by a share of 17% declaring that events and initiatives are not relevant to them, 9% that prefer to engage informally, and 4% who report a lack of broader choice of leadership opportunities within the organisation. These results imply that the main barrier for member participation is rooted in a structural lack of availability, probably caused by the difficulty of time management associated with the nature of volunteering. While many members may desire to increase their activity within the organisation, it may be challenging to balance their professional and personal lives with their volunteering roles within their communities.

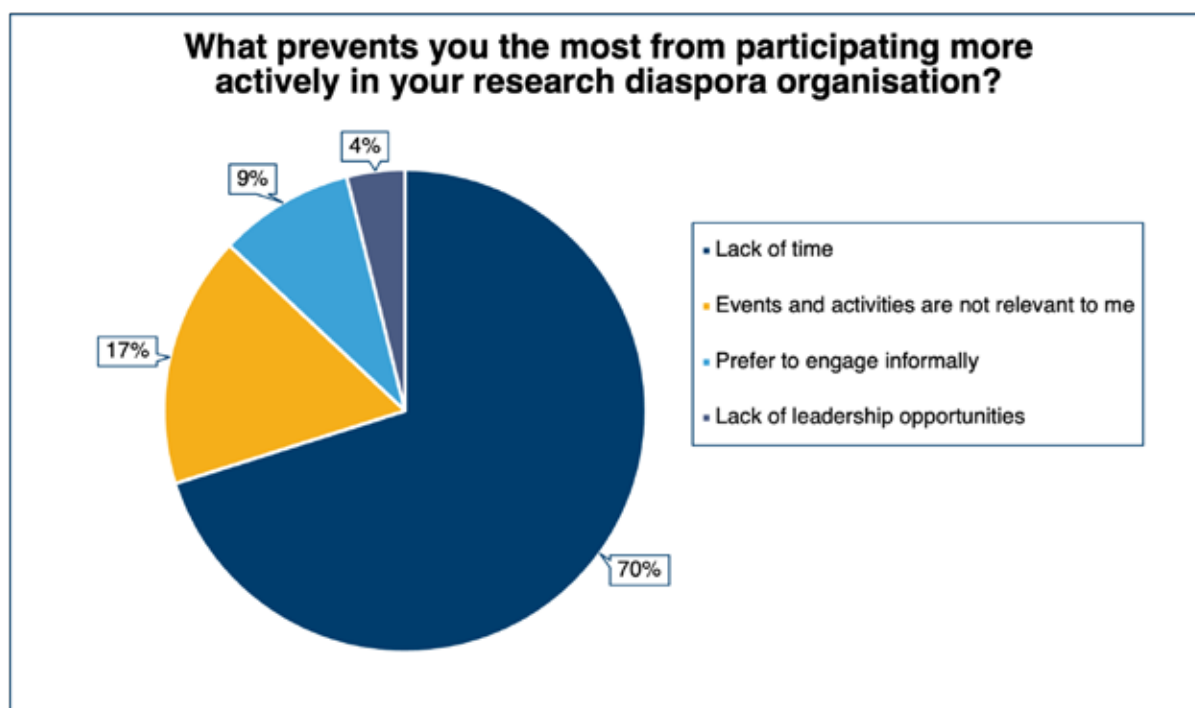


Figure 6. Factors preventing from participation in the organisation's activities. Sample: 77

6.1.3. The member perspectives on the future

When investigating the dynamics and factors that shape member engagement within research diaspora organisations, analyses should not be limited to exploring the current characteristics and state of that engagement, but should also consider examining potential future scenarios and developments. In this context, we asked respondents to indicate their opinions regarding the future goals of their organisation, as well as their preferred forms of future engagement with its activities.

The results in **Figure 7** show a balanced distribution among members' perspectives on what the future goals of the organisation should be. Around 45% of the sample believes that the primary future focus of EU research diaspora organisations should lie in generating visibility for diaspora researchers, advocating for more and better research collaborations and funding opportunities, and creating cultural and social connections. Notably, almost 60% of respondents indicated that organisational priorities should be centred around *fostering networking opportunities and professional growth*. This echoes the results shown in **Figure 1** and **Figure 3**, restating once more that members view research diaspora organisations as a space for creating valuable peer networks and exchanging professional opportunities.

On the other hand, **Figure 8** provides important insights into how members envision their own personal future engagement with the organisation. The data reveal a preference for active and leadership-oriented participation, with 64% of respondents expressing a desire to take on *volunteering for leadership or committee roles*. This is closely followed by 52% who wish to be involved in organising events or initiatives, and an equal share who see themselves providing mentorship to newer members. Thus, a significant portion of the membership does not merely wish to benefit from the organisation, but also aspires to actively shape and sustain it. Notably, only 13% expressed interest in seeking funding opportunities. Taken together, the results from **Figure 7** and **Figure 8** paint a picture of a membership that wants to be proactively engaged in the future of the organisations.

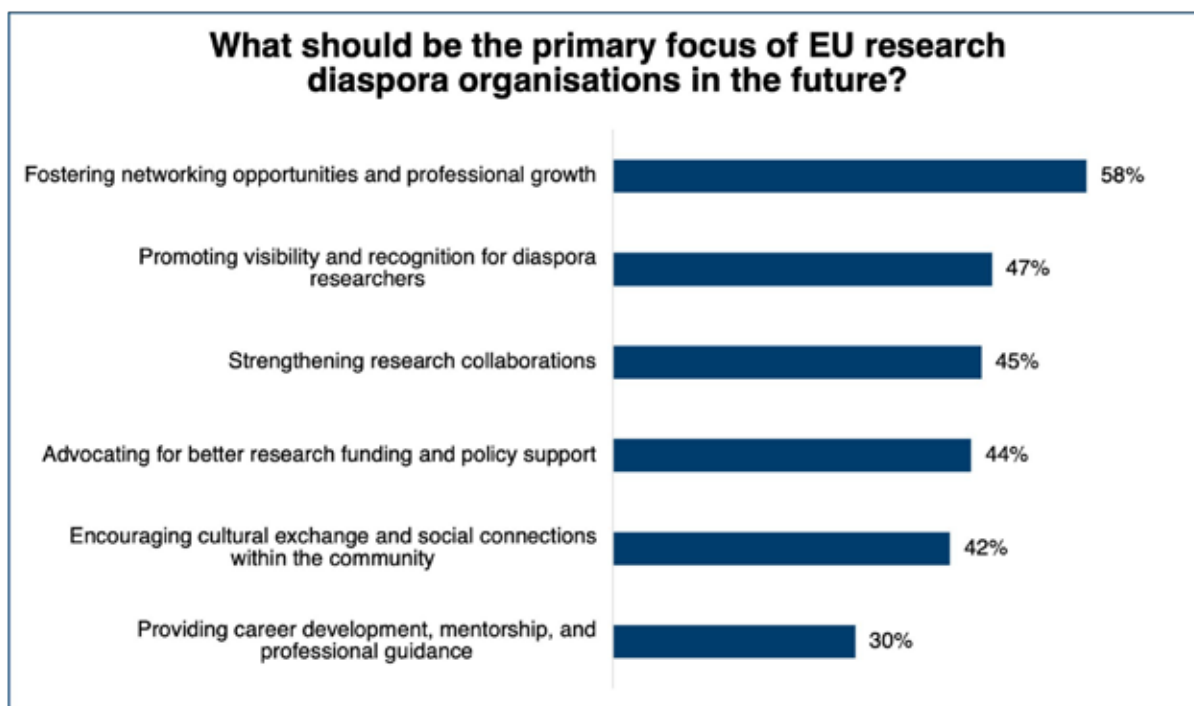


Figure 7. Future focus of EU research diaspora organisations. Sample: 77

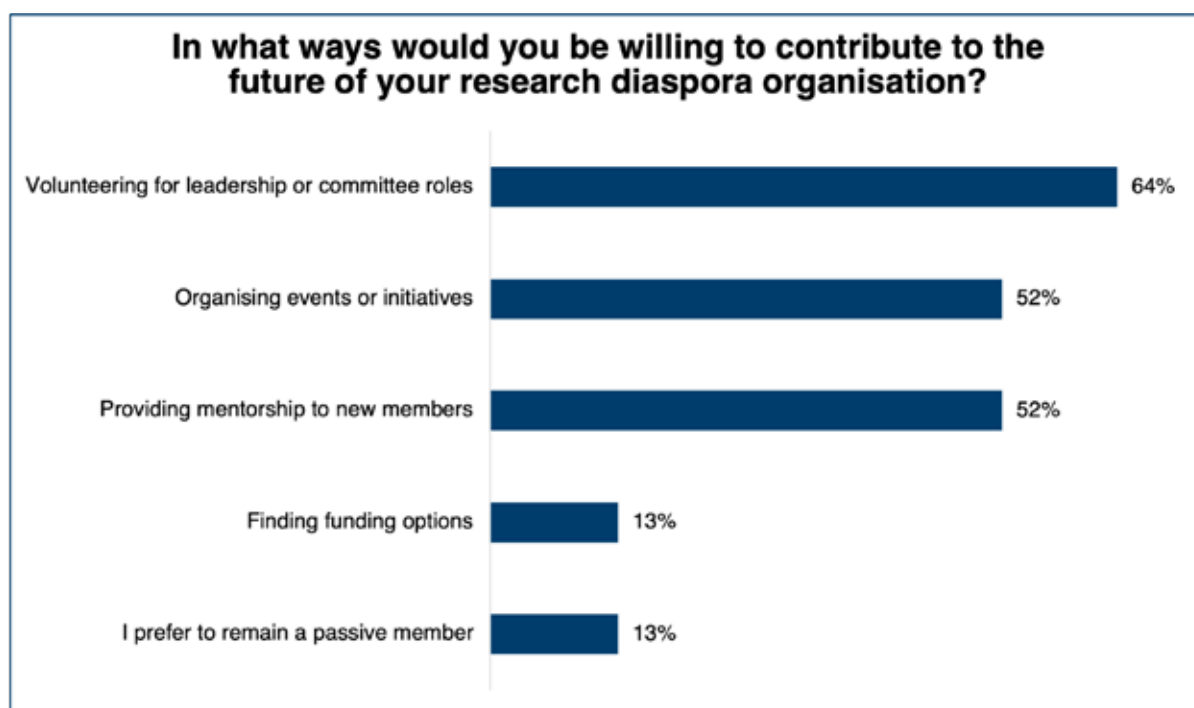


Figure 8. Future contributions from members to the organisation's activities. Sample: 77

6.2. Strategy, activities, and prioritisation

This section analyses how EU research diaspora organisations define and balance their strategic objectives in response to members' needs, organisational capacity, and evolving policy environments. It examines the role of member-value activities as a strategic priority, how individual volunteer capacity shapes what organisations can realistically deliver, and the practical considerations surrounding the frequency, format, and territorial reach of their initiatives.

6.2.1. The role of member-value activities as a strategic priority

Research diaspora organisations consistently report the centrality of organising activities that offer tangible value to members⁵. While many of them might also be involved in science diplomacy efforts or contribute to science policy advice, there is a shared understanding that the first strategic priority is to create initiatives that actively engage and benefit current and prospective members. The focus of these internal initiatives is generally organised around four main areas: professional development opportunities⁶, visibility for members' research⁷, access to funding and career information⁸, and peer support and networking⁹.

As mentioned above, some organisations place crucial importance on becoming science diplomacy hubs, therefore putting strategic efforts into external initiatives such as policy engagement, scientific advisory, or advocacy¹⁰. Therefore, organisations involved in these initiatives view member-value activities not only as providing benefit to their community but also as a means to strengthen the organisation's reputation and positioning, generating potential visibility and recognition by external actors, including institutional stakeholders¹¹.

Frequently, the most active volunteers or leaders of these organisations shape strategic choices to mediate the balance between internal and external initiatives. However, it is deemed crucial that these leaders continually update their awareness of the members' needs and their engagement with the organisation's development¹². Thus, the external activities such as policy engagement or science diplomacy are rarely pursued for their own sake; they are prioritised only

⁵ "Members are at the heart of the association. And it's true that everything that we do at the end [...] is benefiting members or allowing them to access amazing opportunities."

⁶ "We have a professional development manager that tries to develop workshops, skills workshops, or different activities and events for our members, but linked only with the professional development."

⁷ "One of the ideas [...] was to do online events like breakfast events, where we would have talked about [...] what was happening in the diaspora, people presenting their research."

⁸ "We are gonna have a portal where you can go and [...] find the scientists that are around you in the region, or find the scientists in the same discipline, you can take a look at job boards, you can search for grants, we have some functionalities in there, or events that are of interest."

⁹ "They decide to organise this annual event [...] and we invite [...] all people involved in the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, and we invite high level researchers. And we have a discussion about research abroad and this sharing of experiences. [...] And we share good practices. And we also, individually, as researchers, we gain a huge network."

¹⁰ "An opportunity [...] to lead more in this strand of external affairs and external policy and scientific diplomacy, instead of being only an association focused on its members and without any policy relevance."

¹¹ "[Only by] having this community engaged and gathered we can make an impact on science diplomacy. Without serving the community well, and without gathering the people that we gather, we would have no credibility."

¹² "We need to reach out to the members and ask them, and see what they need at this moment."

when the organisation's members actively participate in them and when they are envisioned as ultimately contributing to stronger and more sustained internal engagement¹³.

6.2.2. The importance of individual volunteer capacity

Most of the organisations agree that activity prioritisation is shaped more by available capacity than by strict planning. While many of these organisations might develop a set calendar for the year's activities, the delivery of these depends on the motivation and availability of volunteers, as they carry and implement initiatives at all levels, from leadership to administration¹⁴. Similarly, activities that are new or contingent on a specific collaboration with external stakeholders are entirely dependent on the drive of volunteers to lead and organise them¹⁵. For this reason, changes in the composition of the organisation's leadership might consequently lead to shifts in the thematic focus of activities and their prioritisation. Relatedly, the general lack of continuous administrative support within these organisations can lead to constraints in long-term planning¹⁶.

In this sense, research diaspora organisations often follow a cycle that alternates phases of visible momentum and high activity levels and periods of sustained but less visible internal engagement. As mentioned above, organisations report that the presence of highly committed individual volunteers can often shape and pivot how organisations operate and how they prioritise certain types of initiatives. This is especially true for organisations that have expanded their activity into policy engagement and science diplomacy, as in some cases these areas of work are driven by specific volunteers that already have links with relevant stakeholders or are motivated to get the organisation to become a significant actor in science policy and diplomatic relations¹⁷. Moreover, activity levels are often heavily influenced by the availability of material support from external sources in the form of funding (e.g. awarded grants, allocated budget from the embassies)¹⁸ or institutional in-kind support (e.g. embassies or universities hosting events)¹⁹.

Overall, for research diaspora organisations to deliver successful initiatives, they need a clear understanding of the human and material resources that can be mobilised at any given time.

¹³ "All our initiatives, even public engagement, scientific policy, are very linked to making the community visible, their needs, trying to fix any gaps that we feel that are important. I think members are the engine of the association."

¹⁴ "The challenge is that we are doing this voluntarily. So they're expecting us to produce a high level work [...], but we are all volunteers and doing this on weekends, after dinner at night. So we are doing this because we have passion and because we enjoy it. But we are still volunteers."

¹⁵ "There's not much going on in terms of activities [...], what I mentioned earlier, it's very sometimes dependent on the person who drives the momentum. [...]. It was me who organised an event, and then nothing else much has happened. So it's very dormant."

¹⁶ "We did one session of that in December and we haven't done anything since. [...] It requires basically one person to get involved with the embassy then organise everything, but whether anybody on the board currently has that capacity, I am not sure."

¹⁷ "He was [a leader in the organisation] [...], because of his personal interests, personal in terms of academic interest [...], he started to see an opportunity to engage more in science diplomacy."

¹⁸ "Our organisation is mainly funded by [home country] institutions, so we rely very heavily on these institutions and these organisations on trusting us and making us move and grow."

¹⁹ "We do use the embassy for some of our more important events, and we have access to all their facilities, their rooms for conferences, for receptions, which is something that really impressed our public and our members".

6.2.3. The challenge of frequency, format, and territorial reach of activities

One of the shared challenges reported by EU research diaspora organisations in the UK is related to assessing the frequency, format, and reach of their activities. First, while a high frequency of activities may struggle to achieve its purpose if they do not gather critical mass to create benefits for participants, too few initiatives can signal a lack of continuous internal collaboration and lead to overall disengagement²⁰. Similarly, the balance between in-person, online, and hybrid events can be challenging to achieve. While online activities are easier to organise by volunteers and offer flexibility to attendees, some organisations report that in-person events create more relationship-building opportunities, which can be crucial for organisations that are still developing a stakeholder network²¹. Lastly, many initiatives face the challenge of attracting the right audience, and require constant efforts from the volunteers to share and connect with potential participants, attendees, or interested parties²².

Furthermore, other constraints mentioned include the difficulty of coordinating the availability of volunteers, speakers, and participants throughout the busy academic calendar²³, the London-centric dynamic that deters regional participation across the UK²⁴, and the online format inherited from the pandemic years which, although ensures inclusivity, can also discourage volunteers from organising in-person events²⁵. Overall, organisations weigh the benefits of visibility and external positioning against the need to maintain accessible, high-value activities for their core membership.

²⁰ *"I think one of the reasons why we started to stick to two [events] a year rather than do too many [...]. If it becomes too often, people disengage. If it becomes too rare, then people also don't engage because they don't see the importance of it." / "I think, diasporas, research diasporas in particular, are hard to reach, because they are so selective. People are so selective, what they participate in and who they interact with."*

²¹ *"Within those events that we do, it's very important that we listen to the people on the stage, but also half of the benefit is being able to talk to people who are there and in attendance and what their ideas are."*

²² *"We connect mentors and mentees. [It is a programme] that helps us engage the community and keep them engaged so that the policymakers have easier access. [...] But we actually have real-life examples of what's happening, and we can also temperature check the community, what people think about this, what people think about that."*

²³ *"We are all volunteers, and we have busy jobs and so on. And so it's different than when you have someone fully dedicated to this kind of job."*

²⁴ *"They tried to do a regional meeting with Wales and Bristol, but only 3 people showed up. [...] the London one is far bigger. However, then people would say: 'it's always so London-centric what you're organising'."*

²⁵ *"Suddenly the norm had changed from doing these face-to-face meetings that everybody in the academic world was used to. [...]. Suddenly there were these hybrid options. [...]. And so, that moved on to us trying to do some regional activities, but they were quite difficult to organise, and the turnout was low."*

6.3. Science diplomacy and policy engagement

This section explores how EU research diaspora organisations engage, both formally and informally, with science diplomacy and policy processes in the UK and in their respective home countries. It considers the mediating role these organisations occupy within science diplomacy ecosystems, the distinct models of policy engagement that have emerged across different organisational contexts, and the relationship between home-country and UK-based institutional engagement.

6.3.1. The mediating role of research diasporas organisations in science diplomacy

Most research diaspora organisations report some degree of engagement with science diplomacy and policy actors, though this engagement is not always institutionalised. Many of these interactions occur within specific activities or events and frequently depend on individual informal relationships. All organisations identify the role of the scientific attaché (or the equivalent diplomatic figure in embassies where there is no presence of a scientific attaché) to be extremely important as an intermediary and enabler in policy and science diplomacy engagement²⁶. However, relationships with the scientific attachés or their equivalents can be potentially compromised when staff changes occur or when there are shifts in the embassy's priorities²⁷. As a result, research diaspora organisations may suffer a loss of continuity in engagement and may need to continually reshape their strategy and reaffirm their relevance as science diplomacy actors²⁸.

Furthermore, collaboration with home-country embassies differs across organisations, with a broad spectrum that ranges from occasional contact, to partial operational dependence for the delivery of activities²⁹, and to stable partnerships³⁰. The co-organisation of events, the sharing of networking platforms, and advisory contributions are among the forms of collaborations most widely pursued between research diaspora organisations and embassies. Within this relationship, both successes and challenges are reported. While research diaspora organisations report greater access to institutional channels and recognition as relevant policy actors³¹, barriers also exist, particularly those related to the absence of formal long-term frameworks³².

²⁶ "When there is a scientific attaché it's much easier for us to engage because there is a scientific office that is interested in this."

²⁷ "Our relationship with the embassy, ever since from the beginning, the embassy was very supportive, but they are short on two things, staff and money. [...]. Consuls come and go, the ambassadors come and go."

²⁸ "Because what we see from the embassy [...] they are very open. It also depends on the people there [...], the team has changed now. But the previous team was very into science diplomacy. [...]. These new teams [...], they don't see it as a priority [...]. They also have a bit of trouble understanding why this is important."

²⁹ "But a lot of the administration was still being done by the embassy [...] when we did events. Things like catering, room bookings."

³⁰ "The relationship is excellent at all levels. The embassy is one of our main funders as well, so what they do is allocate to [the association] their whole budget for scientific activity [...], they really trust us that we are going to do the best that we can to use that funding to promote research activities and scientific activities."

³¹ "So they come to us asking for advice and asking for support. [...]. We have the opportunity of being recognised as an important actor, reliable actor, and having influence in policy."

³² "There's less embassy support because they have new strategy points they need to focus on."

6.3.2. The three models of policy engagement

While all organisations have an interest in science diplomacy engagement, they pursue it through different strategies. These can be summarised in the following three models of engagement:

- An expert partner model, in which the organisation focuses on producing knowledge and building a reputation as an influential advisor on research and science policy agendas³³;
- An advocacy model, in which the organisation focuses on articulating the concrete needs of researchers and promoting specific policy changes³⁴;
- A visibility and bridge-building model, in which the organisation aims to serve as a pool of national scientific talent abroad and as a resource for policy actors that want to identify high-performing researchers within the diaspora³⁵.

The way in which organisations position themselves along these models might differ in response to home-country institutional expectations, internal capacity, membership profiles, and policy thematic focus. Moreover, this positioning is rarely fixed and often shifts as leadership changes or as new opportunities for external engagement arise. However, there is consensus regarding the persistence of low institutional awareness of the added value of their communities³⁶ and the difficulty of sustaining engagement without dedicated resources³⁷.

6.3.3. The asymmetry between home-country and UK stakeholders

A strong and consistent finding is the relative accessibility of home-country institutions compared to UK stakeholders. Many organisations describe their engagement with home-country actors as more structured and intentional, noting that these actors generally show a more explicit recognition of diaspora networks as valuable partners given national interests in maintaining ties with scientific talent abroad³⁸. Thus, diplomatic and ministerial structures, as well as national foundations with international strategies, may seek to build relationships with research diaspora organisations that are founded on clear goals, more stable forms of collaboration, and eventually more tangible outcomes.

³³ “We do the scientific telegram. We receive all the important news and funding schemes and what's happening in the science environment in the UK. [...] and then we send it to the Embassy. So the Embassy has some knowledge of what's happening in terms of higher education and science and innovation this month, and then they send it to [the home country], [...] to the ministries that matter.”

³⁴ “There's a specific example which has been really crucial and game-changing, [...] [our association] did contact this [academic equivalences] agency to ask them to apply the post-Brexit law and allow up to 5 years of a period of grace [for academic equivalences to be recognised]. It was a real revolution for members.”

³⁵ “[The association] is one of a number of organisations that allows the embassy to identify key players or key people who could be useful and to have conversations with.”

³⁶ “We do invite a number of stakeholders and institutions to our events, but they never come. And when we have a chance to meet with them, we present what we do, [...], but it's tricky.”

³⁷ “So we need money to create this position [for the association]”.

³⁸ “[The home-country stakeholders] really want to showcase the talent that there's in the UK, to show how [home-country] researchers [that live and work in the UK] help shape the UK”.

In contrast, engagement with UK universities and policy institutions is widely perceived as more informal and less structured³⁹. UK stakeholders are described as having limited interest, assigning value to the academic capital of individual researchers rather than to the organisations as collective actors⁴⁰. This creates a situation in which some organisations achieve meaningful recognition in their home-country ecosystems while remaining relatively marginal in the UK context. To address this situation, research diaspora organisations emphasise the importance of identifying specific institutional entry points for engagement with ⁴¹ and collaborating with other peer networks to increase their visibility⁴².

³⁹ “It was only towards the latter two years that the relationship [with the embassy] got strengthened. But it never extended to the UK policy organisations.” / “With UK institutions, government bodies, the work is much harder, and to my view, there’s still a lot to do. I don’t think we are known yet.”

⁴⁰ “One of the major issues that we’ve encountered is that our [...] universities are not at all necessarily interested in what [the diasporas] are trying to achieve. The UK-EU thing [...] isn’t necessarily of interest, unless it is something of a more generic message that what we’re doing in higher education and the academic community can translate into the wider community”.

⁴¹ “We really need to think through: what is the purpose? What is the aim of that outreach? Is it to enhance mobility? What is the message, then, to the UK government and to the [home country government], or even the EU?”

⁴² “I think it’s easier to participate through CONNECTS-UK, because that voice is amplified and solidified by other diaspora organisations.”

6.4. Inter-organisational collaboration

This section examines how EU research diaspora organisations in the UK collaborate with one another and what drives, shapes, and limits collective action. It considers the role of peer networks as a foundation for inter-organisational engagement, how organisational diversity and reputation influence partnership formation, and how the structural circumstances of research diaspora organisations, including differences in scale, professionalisation, and available resources, bear on their capacity to act collectively.

6.4.1. The centrality of peer networks collaboration

Establishing collaboration with other research diaspora organisations can be extremely influential, especially when an organisation is still in its early stages of development. Highly established organisations are cited as important references, sharing best practices on governance models or activity formats with newer organisations, for whom this exchange of knowledge and information is crucial⁴³. On the other hand, when organisations have a similar level of structure, professionalisation, and reach, creating joint initiatives becomes valuable not only for knowledge and information exchange but also for two other purposes:

- The practicality of sharing and mobilising resources and volunteer capacity, which reduces the risk of duplicating efforts across communities with similar interests⁴⁴.
- The increase in visibility, especially when representing a collective voice engaging with external stakeholders, which strengthens the external positioning of organisations⁴⁵.

6.4.2. The importance of diversity and reputation in creating partnerships

More consolidated organisations tend to diversify their external relationships, engaging simultaneously with a range of actors that may include embassies and ministries, private foundations, and cultural or scientific institutions. This diversification reduces dependency on any single partner and, over time, strengthens the organisation's positioning. Each time a research diaspora organisation successfully collaborates with an external stakeholder, and is recognised as a reliable partner, its reputation solidifies and facilitates subsequent collaborations. Over time, this dynamic eventually leads to a model in which research diaspora organisations no longer need to pursue new partnerships every time, but it is the external stakeholders that turn to them as recognised and trustworthy collaborators⁴⁶.

⁴³ Talking about a specific highly established diaspora organisation: *“Just because of what they produce, and the different local teams that they have, that is definitely something for us to aspire to. We realise that we have not got enough clout amongst our members.”*

⁴⁴ Talking about a joint research project led by three different EU research diaspora organisations: *“That’s why we actually won the bid, because we had these connections with [these three diasporas], we had insight of their associations and we could get researchers to be interviewed.”*

⁴⁵ *“The connection with CONNECTS-UK [...]. That has added a new side of the association which was missing, to become even more present, more visible, and powerful, so that’s something that I’m sure we should explore together as a network of associations.”*

⁴⁶ *“We have this because we have established an institutional, solid, formal and [...] reliable [relationship]. We have that relationship now. [...] So they ask, they come to us, which is amazing, because most of the time [...] it’s very hard for them to open the door.” / “We rely very heavily on these institutions and these organisations on trusting us and making us move and grow.”*

Nonetheless, when research diaspora organisations expand their networks into complex institutional environments, they may encounter not only opportunities but also new challenges. For example, some organisations report the challenge of navigating the political hierarchies of multiple partners, each with their own expectations and priorities when collaborating with the diasporas⁴⁷. For organisations that rely on volunteers, who may or may not be aware of these complexities, the task of managing expectations and navigating the political environment⁴⁸ can become very demanding. As external demands grow faster than internal capacity, this often creates tensions that many organisations describe as difficult to resolve.

6.4.3. The structural circumstances of research diaspora organisations

Most sections of this analysis highlight similarities or differences across research diaspora organisations as a result of their strategic priorities, modes of engagement, or organisational capacity. However, broader structural factors beyond the control of individual organisations can also shape how they function. These two factors were found to be relevant in the interviews:

- The scale of the research diaspora community: Some countries, such as Italy or Spain have a larger diaspora in the UK, while others, like the Netherlands, are much smaller. A larger population creates more opportunities for individuals to engage with their research diaspora organisation, and therefore increases the potential for a broader activity, impact, and reach.
- The size and territorial reach of the home country's diplomatic network: Similarly to the previous point, some EU countries have a more extensive diplomatic presence in the UK, consisting not only of an embassy in London but also consulates and cultural centers distributed across the territory of the UK. The availability of a well-resourced embassy and diplomatic network can increase opportunities for collaborations, with members of research diaspora organisations, regardless of their location in the country, engaging with diplomatic representatives and building relationships.

Consequently, the structural circumstances of each organisation can create meaningful differences in what is achievable in terms of regional outreach and sustained partnerships. These outcomes depend heavily on the density of the organisation's volunteers across the UK and the institutional representation available in the UK.

⁴⁷ "There's so many actors, sometimes it's complicated to acknowledge all of them in their own importance. So, embassies, the ministries, [...], institutes within ministries. Sometimes [it] becomes challenging."

⁴⁸ "Sometimes we are not fully aware of how institutional politics run and sometimes by trying to do our best we end up creating a conflict".

7. Conclusions

EU research diaspora organisations in the UK occupy a distinct and meaningful space at the intersection of professional community-building, cultural identity, and science diplomacy. Across the different dimensions examined in this study, a coherent picture emerges: these are organisations driven primarily by human connection, shaped by structural constraints, and oriented toward collective value in ways that go beyond simple networking.

Members are drawn to these organisations by a dual impulse: the goal of advancing their professional development and the need of belonging to a community of peers. However, the overall analysis reveals that these two main motivations are closely related in the context of these organisations, with professional and personal aspects appearing consistently intertwined in members' engagement towards their communities. Thus, the research diaspora organisations that thrive are those that understand this dialogue and interrelation and build on it. Furthermore, the majority of respondents report feeling personally connected to their organisations even when their participation is intermittent, which points to a form of latent member loyalty.

Active member participation is shaped by the realities of volunteering. The organisations' capacity to deliver initiatives depends heavily on the availability and motivation of a relatively small core of committed individuals, and while respondents generally seem to be inclined to increase their contributions towards the organisation, the results indicate that time constraints are a prevalent barrier to participation. This might create a tension within the organisations: ambitions and strategic goals might be broader than the available human resources to undertake them. This organisational capacity is conditioned by leadership transitions, shifts in volunteer energy, and the absence of dedicated administrative structures, which can introduce challenges when planning activities on the longer term. Nonetheless, many organisations do report adapting to these conditions by moving in cycles of activity and consolidation rather than expecting constant momentum and delivery.

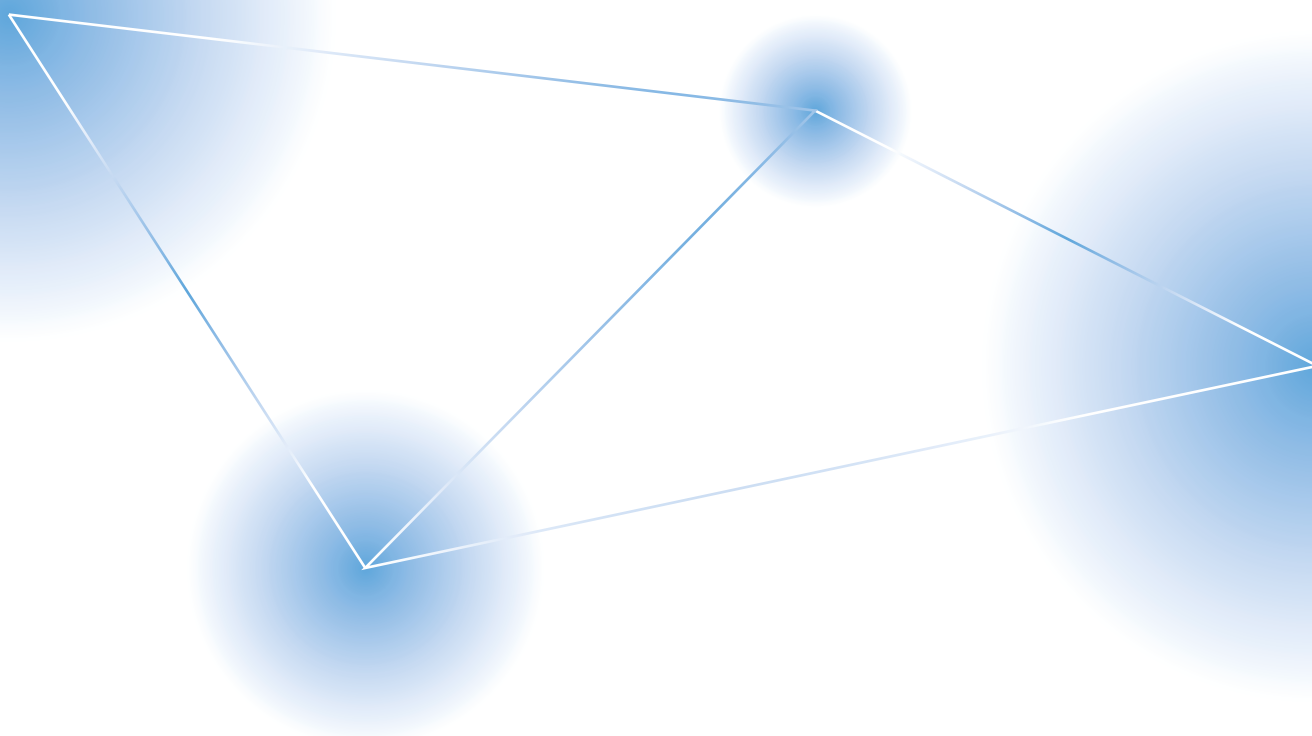
In terms of strategic prioritisation, research diaspora organisations adopt two orientations: inward-facing activities, that promote support and community building, and outward-facing activities, that focus on policy engagement and science diplomacy. Many of them envision these not as competing goals but as mutually reinforcing ones. The pursuit of policy influence and science diplomacy functions is only sustainable when it grows from within the community, which results in a more credible external engagement as well as stays connected to members' interests instead of being imposed.

Relatedly, the analysis of the organisations' dynamics regarding policy and science diplomacy engagement reveals a more structured approach than what might be expected from volunteer-led initiatives, uncovering three models in which it manifests. Some organisations position themselves as expert partners, investing in knowledge production and aiming to influence research and science policy agendas. Others operate through advocacy, channelling members' collective experiences into concrete policy requests and representing the specific needs of diaspora researchers. A third approach focuses on visibility and bridge-building, functioning as pools of scientific talent that policy actors and institutions can turn to when seeking to identify or connect with diaspora researchers. These models are not mutually exclusive, and many organisations move between them as leadership and opportunity evolve. A commonality among most organisations' science diplomacy activity is the relevancy given to the figure of the scientific attaché. The existence or absence of a scientific attaché, as well as the quality of the relationship

if existent with them can determine how meaningfully an organisation is able to engage with home-country policy processes.

In terms of external relationships more broadly, a clear asymmetry exists between home-country and UK institutional engagement. Home-country actors, including diplomatic missions, ministries, and national research foundations with international strategies, tend to recognise diaspora organisations as strategically relevant, viewing them as instruments for maintaining ties with scientific talent abroad and as legitimate interlocutors in bilateral science policy conversations. UK institutions, by contrast, remain largely unaware of their collective value, engaging with individual researchers rather than with the organisations as actors. This creates a situation where some organisations enjoy meaningful recognition and influence in their home-country ecosystems while remaining relatively marginal in the UK context. Addressing this imbalance requires deliberate effort to identify specific institutional entry points and, in many cases, build coalitions with peer networks which help amplify visibility.

Overall the evidence suggests that EU research diaspora organisations are more resilient and more strategically aware than their informal structures might imply. Their continued relevance will depend on how well they can sustain member connections, develop leadership pipelines, and, perhaps most critically, consolidate their standing as indispensable actors in the science diplomacy and policy landscapes of both their home countries and the UK.



8. Annex

Annex I. Questionnaire

- What were your main motivations to join your research diaspora organisation?
 - Networking opportunities
 - Sense of cultural belonging
 - Social events and community building
 - Professional development
 - Access to mentorship and support

- How has being a member of your research diaspora organisation benefited your career?
 - Increased professional networks, contacts and opportunities
 - Increased personal and community informal relationships
 - Volunteering work that complements my CV
 - Access to policy discussions/actors
 - No significant impact
 - Collaboration with other researchers
 - Access to funding opportunities
 - Career guidance and mentorship
 - Increased visibility within my field

- My membership in my research diaspora organisation has enhanced my professional development
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Nor disagree or agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- Community-building was very relevant in my decision to participate in my research diaspora organisation
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Nor disagree or agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- Have political or policy developments (e.g., Brexit, research funding changes) influenced your engagement with your diaspora organisation?
 - Yes, I became more involved
 - No impact on my engagement
 - Yes, I became less involved
 - Unsure

- How frequently do you participate in activities/events organised by your diaspora organisation?
 - Very regularly (at least once a week)
 - Regularly (at least once a month)
 - Occasionally (a few times a year)
 - Rarely (once a year or less)
 - Never

- What prevents you the most from participating more actively in your research diaspora organisation?
 - Lack of time
 - Events and activities are not relevant to me
 - Lack of leadership opportunities
 - Prefer to engage informally

- What should be the primary focus of EU research diaspora organisations in the future?
 - Fostering networking opportunities and professional growth
 - Promoting visibility and recognition for diaspora researchers
 - Strengthening research collaborations
 - Advocating for better research funding and policy support
 - Encouraging cultural exchange and social connections within the community
 - Providing career development, mentorship, and professional guidance

- I feel personally connected to my research diaspora organisation
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Nor disagree or agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- In what ways would you be willing to contribute to the future of your research diaspora organisation?
 - Volunteering for leadership or committee roles
 - Organising events or initiatives
 - Providing mentorship to new members
 - Finding funding options
 - I prefer to remain a passive member
 - Other (write)

Annex II. Interview prompts

1. Activity

- How are resources distributed between member-focused and external-facing activities?
- How do you prioritise among different types of activities?

2. Engagement with Embassy

- What is your relationship with your home country's embassy in the UK? Formal or informal relationship?
- In what areas do you collaborate? Have any of them had evident success?
- What are the challenges?
- How do you think this relationship could improve?

3. Engagement with UK policy stakeholders

- Do you engage with UK institutions or policymakers? Formally or informally?
- What policy or research areas are involved? Have any of them had evident success?
- What are the challenges?
- How do you think this relationship could improve?

4. Engagement with home country (EU member state) policy stakeholders

- Do you engage with institutions or policymakers in your EU member state? Formally or informally?
- What policy or research areas are involved? Have any of them had evident success?
- What are the challenges?
- How do you think this relationship could improve?

5. Resource allocation of policy engagement and science diplomacy

- How do you allocate resources between Embassy engagement, UK-based engagement, home country engagement?

6. Engagement with other EU research diaspora organisations in the UK

- Do you collaborate with other EU research diaspora organisations? Excluding CONNECTS-UK.

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