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Assessment of NOVEL Approaches to Alignment

Case Study No.4 – Process towards a Common Position on Alignment in Austria

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the key features, outputs and overall strengths and limitations of the **process towards finding a common position on alignment in Austria among the mayor R&D Stakeholders**. The Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology, together with the Austrian Ministry for Science, Research and Economy set up a collaborative process bringing together the relevant Austrian research stakeholders to work towards a common national agreement on transnational alignment in research strategy, planning and funding. In the course of this process, awareness for the alignment topic is raised and commitment for future alignment activities in P2Ps is built. This case study reveals that a main pre-condition for a common position on alignment is national coordination among all RTI key players.

The case shows the following **strengths** of this novel approach towards a common position on alignment in Austria:

- **Raise visibility of, awareness on and mobilisation for transnational alignment activities at national level:** The process did not only raise visibility of and awareness on the alignment topic as such but also build commitment at the level of national key RTI stakeholders towards transnational alignment in P2P. This provides the foundation for their future mobilisation of key RTI stakeholders in this respect and the implementation of necessary pre-conditions for transnational alignment at national level.
- **Position paper as a means to an end:** Besides the legitimating effect of the document, a RTI policy process was set up for the development of the paper. The policy process focused on the development of a common position of national key RTI stakeholders on the importance of alignment to implement ERA and on national pre-conditions for transnational alignment.
- **Appropriate means and few resources needed:** The whole process was relatively inexpensive and fast regarding the already realised and the expected future output.

However, this novel approach also reveals **limitations**:

- **Definitional problem:** The first challenging step was to agree on a common understanding of the term 'alignment' and its implications for all RTI stakeholders at national level. This was based on the previous work of the GPC, which gave a first definition of alignment at strategic/policy level.
- **Commitment for implementation of next steps is voluntary:** The position paper includes a collection of useful steps to be taken in the future. However, the position paper does not include an implementation plan with clear commitments of the different key stakeholders for implementation of next steps. This is also due to the nature of the process design.

This novel approach towards a common alignment position demonstrates that the process itself **raised awareness of and built commitment to alignment activities among national RTI stakeholders**. The initial process to develop a common position on alignment and the transferability of this process is assessed very high.

This case study is addressing the following **reader groups**:

- **Coordinators of national research programmes at RTI ministries** to become aware of possibilities of national coordination for alignment
- **Coordinators of P2Ps** to be conscious about the national coordination processes on alignment in place, which are essential for future activities within P2P
- **Policy makers of the European Commission** to learn about how to support national coordination on alignment in the future as this is a necessary pre-condition.

The case study builds on the ERA-LEARN 2020 "Definition and Typology of Alignment" and relies on a review of existing literature and a targeted interview. The case is part of a series investigating NOVEL approaches towards alignment.

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1. Introduction

The internationalisation and the consequently growing necessity for connectedness of national research on transnational level leads to higher demands towards member states to align and coordinate their national RTI strategies and programmes. The European Commission states: “The crux is to enable transnational research and innovation by exploiting synergies between national and international programmes, strategically aligning different sources of national and other funds at EU level [...]. The **level of alignment is presently too low** to make a serious impression on big and complex challenges”¹. Therefore, the European Commission started to initiate dedicated processes and instruments to push for transnational alignment, e.g. Joint Programming Initiatives or ERA-NETs. These developments call **member states to seek a common position on alignment** in order to set-up appropriate framework conditions on national level to become operational and active on transnational level and ensure transnational research activities benefit the national RTI system.

This case study examines a process aiming at developing a common position of national key RTI stakeholders on alignment that was recently initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science, Research and the Economy. This **demand-driven process resulted in a position paper** summarising the perspectives of relevant RTI stakeholders as a first step. The process itself **raised awareness and built commitment among the national RTI stakeholders**, including policy makers, funding agencies and other intermediaries, universities and other public research (and technology) organisations. The developed position will serve as a **starting point for implementing future activities** to support transnational alignment on national level. Building up on this process, a Working Group of the Austrian RTI-Task Force dedicated to Alignment has been established. This Group is jointly chaired by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science, Research and the Economy. Furthermore, the **dissemination** of this process’ good practices is planned at European and transnational level.

Addressing alignment issues at national level via a high-level initiative draws on the results of the Austrian Federal Government’s RTI strategy (Republik Österreich 2011). For the national coordination and implementation of the Austrian RTI strategy a RTI Task Force was set up comprising high-level policy actors of the five Austrian ministries involved in RTI. Additionally, there have been working groups established for RTI areas of specific interests for more than one ministry with the aim to increase inter-ministerial coordination and information exchange and engage with dedicated stakeholders on the specific issue. One of these working groups focusses on the development of the European Research Area 2020 and the Austrian engagement (**Working Group (WG) 7b ‘Europe’ of the RTI Task Force**). In 2013, the WG 7b ‘Europe’ published the **‘Austrian EU Action Plan’** (Working Group 7b 2013). This EU Action Plan includes on the one hand the positions Austria should support with regard to European RTI policy, and on the other hand measures which Austria should take forward, in order to be as well prepared and adjusted as possible with regard to these current developments in the field of European RTI policy. Six priority areas with respective measures have been identified. One of the six priority areas is **‘Strengthening multilateral cooperation’** in order to support and enable multilateral cooperation, the openness towards transnational alignment of national programmes, funding rules and regulations and the corresponding instruments. As a result of this process the WG 7b ‘Europe’ has been replaced by a WG ‘Alignment’ of the RTI Task Force.

In order to strengthen multilateral cooperation, a stakeholder group (MULLAT Working Group) was established in 2014 comprising Austrian stakeholders (representatives of ministries, funding agencies or research organisations)

¹ European Commission: Optimal transnational co-operation and competition - Jointly addressing grand challenges: http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/optimal-transnational-co-operation-and-competition_en.htm

involved in the coordination of multilateral initiatives (e.g. JPIs, JTIs, Art. 185, ERA-NETs etc.). The MULLAT Working Group aims on the exchange of experience in transnational cooperation, the identification of problems and development of solutions. Within the **MULLAT Working Group** the original idea was born that the development of a joint position of Austrian key RTI stakeholders on alignment is useful to provide common ground for the establishment of appropriate changes and pre-conditions in Austria.

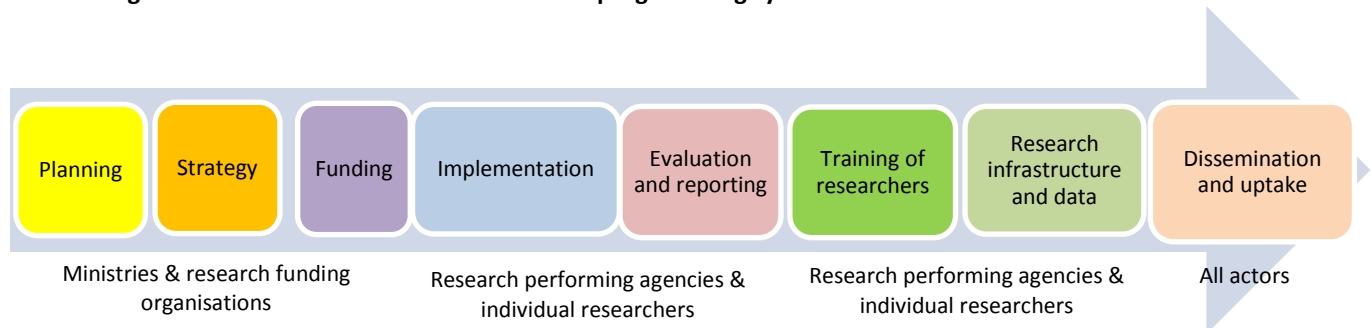
The Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science, Research and the Economy responded to these demands and initiated a process towards the development of a common position in Austria on alignment. The published **“Report on Definition and Typology of Alignment”** in 2015 (ERA-Learn 2020 2015) served as a critical and strategic input for the process, because its strength is twofold: (1) the concrete definition of alignment developed by the GPC and adopted by ERA-LEARN 2020 (Box 1) and (2) identification of concrete alignment actions and modalities (Box 2).

Box 1: Definition of Alignment and the Role of Member States

“Alignment is the strategic approach taken by Member States to modify their national programmes, priorities or activities as a consequence of the adoption of joint research priorities in the context of Joint Programming, with a view to implement changes to improve the efficiency of investment in research at the level of Member States and the European Research Area”.

Source: GPC Definition of alignment adopted by ERA-LEARN 2020 in ERA-LEARN 2020 (2015): Deliverable 4.1 Report on the Definition and Typology of Alignment.

Box 2: Alignment actions across the entire research programming cycled



Source: ERA-LEARN 2020 (2015): Deliverable 4.1 Report on the Definition and Typology of Alignment.

2. Key features of the process towards a common position on alignment in Austria

2.1 Methodology and objectives of the process

The process ‘towards a common position on alignment’ was initiated by the Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science, Research and the Economy. Methodology and objectives of the process drew on ERA-LEARN 2020 “Report on the Definition and Typology of Alignment”, in particular on the key barriers and key factors for successful alignment.

The process design and methodology considered the following recommendations:

- **Trust and consensus building:** Consultation and dialogue are key to integrate all positions, reach consensus and build political commitment. Thus, collaborative formats were applied.

- **Open process design:** Accounting for the explorative proceeding and the lack of common understanding, an open step-by-step design accounts for the necessity to react to contingent output of each phase and adapt the next step.
- **'Soft' policy coordination:** Integration of relevant RTI stakeholders through 'soft' policy coordination; in comparison with top-down mechanisms, this approach has a faster proceeding and a higher probability of commitment of stakeholders.

This **process** aims at achieving the following **objectives**:

- **Raise awareness among Austrian RTI stakeholders and ministries on alignment issues:** The objective is to put the topic 'alignment' on the agenda of Austrian key RTI stakeholders and develop a common understanding of the terminology.
- **Reach consensus among key Austrian RTI stakeholders on a common alignment position:** To achieve this overarching objective, the process aims at building commitment among Austrian Stakeholders for future alignment activities by involving them from the start. The first phase (see below) prepares key actors for future alignment activities and the latter's implementation.
- **Develop a Report called 'Austrian position paper on alignment':** Simply said, the report summarises the findings of the process (for description of the process see Section 2.2). More specifically, the report analysis and report writing phase served as a 'mean' to reach agreement between the participating stakeholders via multiple rounds of feedback. In the end this report can be seen as a common position and commitment of Austrian RTI Stakeholders on transnational alignment.
- **Disseminate Austrian experience on the development of a common position on alignment at European level:** Share Austrian experience on the development of a common position on alignment and the results of the process in dedicated working groups at European level.

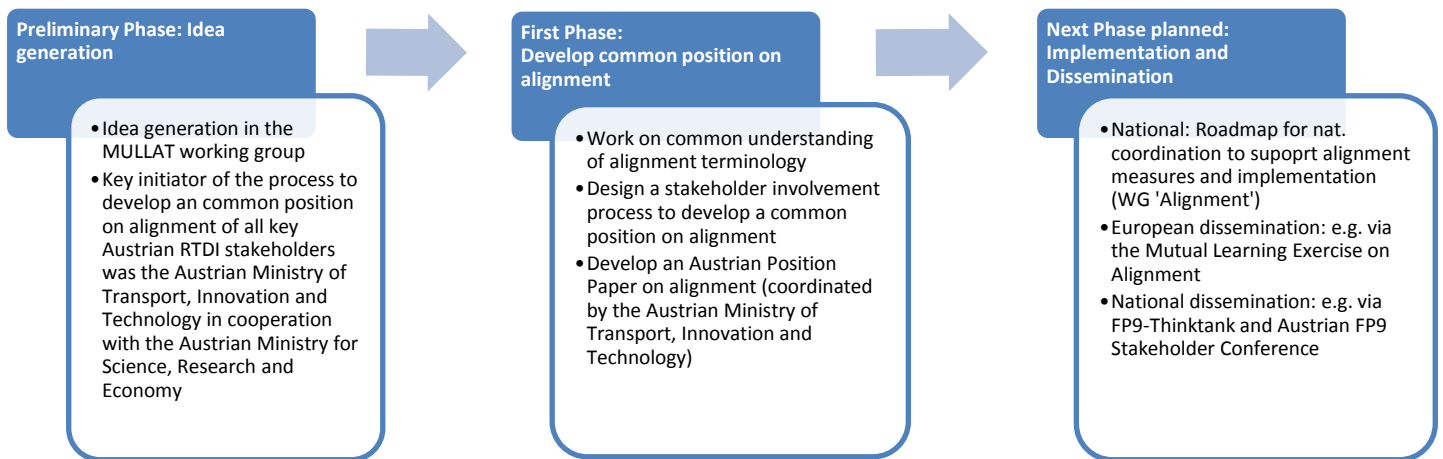
2.2 Description of the process

In the following the process will be described in three phases. The current state of the multi-step process (mid of 2016) features an accomplished first phase (with the position paper as a tangible output). The next phase is at planning stage and will start in the third quarter of the year 2016. In this section, the first phase is described in detail and the future steps are sketched including plans of dissemination (see Figure 1). Figure 1 provides an overview of the whole process.

Preliminary Phase: Idea generation

The idea for this process originated from P2P representatives engaged in MULLAT Working Group. Additionally, the process is based on the Austrian RTI Strategy (2011) and its Austrian EU Action Plan (2013) which identified the strengthening of multilateral cooperation as one of the key priorities (see Section 1). Based on the Austrian EU Action Plan the MULLAT Working Group was established and the need for a common position on alignment in Austria identified. The Austrian Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology took the initiative and started the process towards a common position on alignment of all key Austrian RTDI stakeholders (First Phase).

Figure 1: Overview of a Process towards a Common Position on Alignment in Austria



Source: Own presentation

The First Phase: Common understanding of alignment terminology, raise awareness and build commitment

A steering group under the direction of the Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology was set-up. Prominent partners involved were the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy and the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG). The Institute for Economic and Innovation Research (POLICIES) of JOANNEUM RESEARCH that is specialised in research and innovation policies analysis supported the core group during the process. JOANNEUM RESEARCH Forschungsgesellschaft mbH is a research and technology organisation in Austria. The Institute for Economic and Innovation Research supported the process by providing knowledge in research policy analysis, by supporting the organisation of dedicated workshops and by drafting the position paper being the agreed view on alignment by the major Austrian R&D stakeholders. As a basic first task, the core group elaborated a **common understanding of the alignment** definition and typology drawing on the definitional document provided by the GPC and adopted by ERA-LEARN 2020 (2015). This common understanding was the foundation for the **interviews with Austrian RTI stakeholders** (conducted by the Institute for Economic and Innovation Research of JOANNEUM RESEARCH) from the national research ministries, research funding agencies, universities and research institutions. On the basis of qualitative and quantitative analyses, hypotheses were derived with respect to current state, meaning, and need for action of alignment.

These hypotheses were discussed and adapted within two collaborative **stakeholder workshops**. The workshop participants were representatives of the ministries (Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology, Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, the Federal Ministry of Health and Women's Affairs, the Federal Ministry for Agriculture), research funding agencies (Austrian Research Promotion Agency [FFG], Austrian Science Fund [FWF]), large research institutes, and the universities (re-presented by the UNIKO - Universities Austria). Supported by the Institute for Economic and Innovation Research of JOANNEUM RESEARCH, collaborative methods were applied for the workshop with focus on reaching consensus on the collected statements of Austrian RTI Stakeholders on the common position on alignment including core messages and recommendations. For clarifications, **additional interviews** were conducted.

The consensus reached is described in a **position paper** recently published (Polt et al. 2016) (main points see Section 3 and Annex 1) reflecting the Austrian demand for and potential involvement in transnational alignment activities. It is noteworthy that the document **does not depict the official Austrian position but is a collection of**

commonly agreed national RTI stakeholder positions. As emphasized by the interview partner, the development of the position paper by collaborative workshops worked as a **means to an end**: This process **raised awareness** and **built commitment** by the collaborative development of a common position. This trust building and the introduction of a common aim represents the groundwork for future steps. The result can also be seen as a commitment towards alignment and a mandate for continued further effort, where appropriate.

Next Phase planned: Implementation and Dissemination

The aim of the next steps will not be limited to awareness and consensus building but focuses on the mobilisation of RTI actors by designing a roadmap for implementation of concrete measures on national level for transnational alignment, where appropriate. Furthermore, European and trans-national dissemination is intended.

- **WG 7b ‘Europe’ has completed its mandate. A new WG ‘Alignment’ of the RTI Task Force** has been set up. As a **high level initiative** it will **identify policies and concrete measures on national level to support trans-national alignment** which will be derived from the First Phase’s position paper. The **dissemination** of the process results and design is planned **at European level** in the **Mutual Learning Exercise on Alignment**. As the representatives in the core group are also active in the Mutual Learning Exercise on Alignment knowledge transfer can be ensured.
- Findings of the process will also be disseminated to **national level initiatives that are in the process of developing positions regarding FP9** (e.g. Austrian FP9 Stakeholder Conference in October 2016 and the national FP9-Thinktank).

3. Outputs of the process with respect to alignment

Outputs of this process are manifold and directed towards the entire research programming cycle (see Box 2). As this process started recently, the major outputs are limited to its first phase. Besides the concrete output of the position paper, also intangible outputs are presented in the following.

Concrete outputs:

- **Position Paper:** The most prominent output of the initial phase is the position paper enclosing 18 “Key Messages and Hypotheses” which all involved RTI stakeholders agreed upon (see Annex 1). Main points relevant for this case study’s audience are sketched hereinafter:
 - **Summary of positions of national key RTI stakeholders:** By collecting positions of Austrian key RTI stakeholders, discussing them and finding consensus, the process uncovered the diversity of Austrian perspectives in general. It potentially introduces convergence of these perspectives in the next steps.
 - **National Coordination:** National Alignment activities are a key prerequisite for the successful participation in the EU Framework Programmes.
 - **Thematic priorities setting on national level supports transnational alignment:** Clear thematic priorities on national level are key for alignment. A strong cooperation and communication between the involved ministries in one thematic priority or an inter-ministerial group responsible for one thematic priority supports alignment, especially if institutional coordination will be followed (universities and research organisations)
 - **Operational level:** On operational level national programmes and instruments exist that can be used for alignment and support national pre-conditions for alignment.
 - **Interoperability:** In order to achieve better compatibility between applied national and transnational funding mechanisms and minimise transaction costs, *all actors* involved shall work

on interoperability regulations. The position paper gives detailed pragmatic suggestions (details see Annex, No 18).

- **Benefits from transnational alignment for Austrian stakeholders:** If alignment is followed on strategic and operational level, Austria actors would benefit from alignment e.g. by financial returns from the EC to the Austrian community, new know-how, integration of national actors in European networks. Additionally common engagement and continuity of activities would provide better ground for finding solutions for societal challenges.
- **Trade-offs caused by alignment:** The evaluation and analysis of potential trade-offs of alignment should be investigated for specific programmes.

Intangible outputs:

- **Raise awareness among policy-makers:** In the course of this first phase, national efforts towards alignment gained attention making it a key issue at high level policy making. This is reflected by the fact that WG 7b 'Europe' of the RTI Task Force will be replaced by the WG 'Alignment' in the future.
- **Raise awareness among Austrian RTI stakeholders who have not been involved in the alignment discussion:** The topic 'alignment' is put on the agenda of Austrian RTI stakeholders who have not been involved in alignment issues before and discussions about this issue were successfully stimulated.
- **Reaching consensus among Austrian RTI stakeholders on the importance of alignment:** Another consequent process output is that a certain degree of convergence was introduced among the diverse Austrian representatives of P2Ps with respect to their position on alignment. The workshops presented a common goal to them and committed them to own alignment efforts.
- **National coordination as pre-condition for transnational alignment:** National coordination among all RTI key players (i.e. the process you describe) is a pre-requisite in order to develop a national common position on alignment and the development of specific dedicated actions toward implementation of alignment.
- **Identification of support from the EC for alignment:** The EC needs to establish specific support measures for alignment (e.g. continuity of P2P instruments/processes to enable planning in Member States). The EC should also acknowledge that alignment needs time on national level.

4. Overall strengths and key achievements of this instrument with respect to alignment

This part summarises the strengths and achievements of this process towards a common position on alignment in Austria.

- **Position paper as a means to an end:** Besides the legitimating effect of the document, it has relied on an approach that has allowed to coordinate and integrate key RTI actors at national level in discussions on alignment, and, in doing so, that has laid the foundation at national level for future Austrian participation in alignment activities (e.g. development of transnational research strategies and implementation of transnational research activities with other countries).
- **Raise visibility of, awareness on and mobilisation for transnational alignment activities at national level:** The process did not only raise visibility and awareness but also build commitment of national key RTI actors and provides the foundation for their future mobilisation and national involvement in transnational alignment activities.
- **'Soft' policy coordination with high effect:** The process was initiated by two ministries (out of five ministries dealing with RTI). It was set-up as a 'soft' policy coordination process, driven by the stakeholders involved. The results will now take on to a higher level policy debate.
- **Appropriate means and few resources needed:** The whole process was relatively inexpensive and fast regarding the already realised and the expected future output.

5. Overall limitations and challenges of this process

This part summarises the limitations and challenges of the process. As this process is still in its initial phase, this section focuses on challenges and lessons learnt.

- **Definitional problem:** The first challenging step was to agree on a common understanding of the term 'alignment' and its implications for all RTI stakeholders at national level. This might remain a challenge in future.
- **No official national position on alignment:** The process was set-up as a soft policy coordination mechanism and was open in terms of results, the document does not represent an official Austrian position by the national government, but a common agreement by Austrian RTI stakeholders, including the Ministries responsible for R&D.

6. Conclusions: Key success factors of the process and transferability

The initial process to develop a common position on alignment was very successful so far and will provide the foundation for further steps. It revealed that the main pre-condition for a common position at national level on alignment issues is national coordination among all RTI key players.

The transferability of this process is assessed very high. The described first phase of this process is regarded as a good practice example, the positive experiences call for an adjusted adoption by other member states. This section summarises the most relevant success factors of developing a common position on alignment serving as recommendations for other member states and provide information for policy-makers in other European countries.

Key success factors:

- **Soft policy coordination approach and multi-phase approach:** This approach ensured the participants' commitment and mobilisation for further action according to the interviewee. The multi-phased design was highly appropriate in order a) to agree on a common understanding of alignment, b) to collect the perspectives of key RTI stakeholders and c) to decide after each phase on the next step – treating the process' objective as a 'moving target'.
- **Expert support from the Institute for Economic and Innovation Research of JOANNEUM RESEARCH in Austria:** The Austrian Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology contracted an Austrian research organisation specialised in research policies to support it for this process. The Institute for Economic and Innovation Research of JOANNEUM RESEARCH supported the process by providing knowledge in research policy analysis, by supporting the organisation of dedicated workshops and by drafting the position paper representing the agreed view on alignment by the major Austrian R&D stakeholders. The support of such an Institute for Economic and Innovation Research is vital for a professional set-up and legitimacy of the process.
- **Interactive formats and scientific guidance:** Interactive and collaborative methods applied in workshops facilitated interaction among diverse actors and helped to reach consensus despite different agendas.
- **Key RTDI policy makers are owner of the process:** The two RTDI ministries driving the process towards a common position of alignment are at the same time in power for the implementation of respective activities on national level to support transnational alignment. This 'double' role increases the impact of the process.
- **Apply alignment definition and typology:** The availability of a proper definition and typology of alignment as entry point for discussion enables efficient communication among diverse actors in the first place.

Outlook and requirements

The Austrian case provides valuable insights and lessons learnt how a process towards a common position on alignment can be initiated. Other member states and actors at European level can benefit from these experiences gained. The initiators and the participating stakeholders identified the **following requirements facilitating future work on alignment at national level.**

- **Extension of the alignment typology:** During the process and interaction with P2Ps, it became clear that further development of the alignment typology is required as the current framework proved too narrow. An extension is needed with respect to two dimensions:
 - **Research programming cycle is too narrow:** Currently, the alignment typology is only connected to the research programming cycle (see Box 2). According to the interviewee's experience in the process, the alignment typology should also consider the **innovation cycle**, including the alignment of applied research and pilot/demo/implementation undertakings, which are funded by public means. Parts of the P2Ps focus on the development of concrete solutions for societal challenges and want to initiate transition, which includes implementation and on-site transition.
 - **Alignment of public innovation funds:** The alignment typology should also be extended by alignment modalities aiming on the alignment of innovation strategies and investments of practitioners, e.g. firms, cities, public utilities. When public innovation funds or investment funds support firms or cities in implementation of their innovation strategies, there is room to align at least the public innovation funds hoping that indirectly practitioners' strategies will follow.
- **Alignment as a continuous process:** When initialising such a multi-phased process, national initiators and EC representatives shall be aware of its long duration. Building trust and commitment among relevant actors takes time and needs continuous cultivation.
- **Concrete examples as learning material:** Besides the alignment definition and typology, it is important to improve understanding of alignment among member states' RTI stakeholders by concrete examples. Case studies on measures and success stories are considered valuable to understand and design alignment processes.

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ANNEX 1

Key messages and hypothesis of the Position Paper on alignment in Austria

(short translation by the Institute for Economic and Innovation Research of JOANNEUM RESEARCH)

1. National Alignment activities are a key prerequisite for the successful participation in ERA and in the EU Framework Programmes.
2. In relation to national public funding for R&D, Austria shows a strong engagement in transnationally coordinated R&D activities compared to other EU member states
3. Compared to generic funding for R&D, thematic prioritisation via competitive funding modes is low in Austria.
4. Austrian R&D-performers have in general a positive attitude towards alignment. The participation in the definition of joint research agendas, transnational networks, R&D projects and infrastructures are seen to be the most important alignment tools.
5. Positive impacts of alignment especially comprise access to transnational technological trends and scientific developments. Alignment via joint activities allows for large and complex projects that might not be realisable on national level solely.
6. Regarding research management, especially for basic research, alignment towards transnational standards helps to professionalise project management.
7. Alignment activities have to be assessed against systemic features of the respective RTI system and may help to improve national coordination of actors.
8. Participation in transnational activities increases Austria's visibility in Europe and its impact on agenda setting in European programmes.
9. Hence, Alignment is a key driver for the competitiveness of national R&D.
10. Often high administrative efforts for the participation in transnational activities compared to sometimes only limited actual budgets for research are seen as a challenge.
11. Hence, alignment activities require targeted resources, both in public administrations as well as in RFOs and universities.
12. An explicit national budget for the co-financing of transnational R&D was suggested to overcome the fragmentation of resources among several ministries and RFOs.
13. Alignment is not self-sufficient objective. Transnational R&D activities should be part of national programme planning and complement it where potential benefits are expected. This calls also for an improvement of empirical evidence on the impacts of transnational R&D initiatives.
14. A catalogue of criteria to strategically decide upon the future participation in transnational R&D activities should be developed.
15. Regional agenda setting according to Smart Specialisation and the related allocation of structural funds are an important component of alignment.
16. A Pre-requisite for successful alignment via transnational activities is the existence of national R&D programmes and priorities in respective areas.
17. Institutional alignment requires visible benefits for the respective actors. These could be both financial or immaterial, like access to new partners.
18. Efforts to improve interoperability by further aligning funding rules between national and transnational programmes should be intensified.

Source: Polt et al. 2016