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# **A4L\_BRIDGE**

## **Alliance4Life Bridging the Research and Innovation Gap in Life Sciences**

*HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-03 -- 101136453*

### **D5.1 Virtual Research Center Webpage**

Work Package: WP5  
Task: T5.1  
Deliverable due date: 28/02/2025  
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Deliverable number: D5.1  
Deliverable type: DEC  
Dissemination level: PU  
Version: 1.1



Funded by the European Union under Grant Agreement No 101136453, A4L\_BRIDGE. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Alliance4Life's consortium. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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## 1 Executive Summary

The Virtual Research Center (VRC) website is a key deliverable of Work Package 5 (WP5) within the A4L\_BRIDGE project, designed to facilitate scientific collaboration, networking, and knowledge exchange among Alliance4Life member institutions. Originally, Alliance4Life focused on bridging the innovation gap through the development of research management professionals and the improvement of institutional governance. Over time, the consortium expanded its focus to strengthen scientific collaboration, which was supported by previous initiatives such as the Seed Fund and Open Access Call under the A4L\_ACTIONS project.

Building on these achievements, the VRC was established to provide a structured and sustainable framework for deeper scientific cooperation among Alliance4Life institutions. The VRC website (D5.1) serves as the primary digital platform, ensuring seamless interinstitutional and interdisciplinary collaboration across the 12 member institutes. The website includes dedicated research departments, structured resources, and collaboration tools, supporting researchers through mini-conferences, webinars, and a Virtual Journal Club.

Additionally, the VRC is strategically linked with other A4L\_BRIDGE initiatives, including mentorship programs (WP4), internships (WP8), and the e-learning platform (WP3), ensuring a multiplicative effect that maximizes the impact of joint research efforts. As the VRC grows, the website will be continuously enhanced with new collaboration tools, data-sharing mechanisms, and expanded functionalities to ensure its long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

## 2 Objectives of the Work Package

The Virtual Research Center (VRC) website plays a central role in Work Package 5 (WP5) of the A4L\_BRIDGE project, serving as the primary digital infrastructure to support scientific collaboration, networking, and knowledge exchange. WP5 aims to establish a sustainable research platform, engage with patient associations and professional networks, and facilitate the development of joint research agendas.

### **Facilitating the Creation of the Virtual Research Center (T5.1)**

A key objective of WP5 is the creation of the VRC, structured into virtual research departments. The VRC website (D5.1) directly supports this goal by providing researchers with access to information about departments, projects, collaboration opportunities, and scientific events. The site ensures that the mission, governance structure, and operational framework of the VRC are clearly presented, fostering transparency and accessibility.

The website also promotes and coordinates scientific networking activities, including the annual in-person mini-conference, virtual scientific meetings, and the Virtual Journal Club. By offering event listings, speaker information, and registration options, the platform enhances participation and engagement.

Future updates will include research material repositories, discussion forums, and collaborative tools to extend interactions beyond live events and facilitate ongoing knowledge exchange and long-term collaboration. These features are planned for later stages of the project as part of the continuous enhancement of the VRC website.

Additionally, the VRC website strengthens connections with mentorship programs (WP4), internships (WP8), and e-learning initiatives (WP3). By centralizing access to training resources and professional development opportunities, the platform enhances interdisciplinary collaboration and research capacity building within Alliance4Life.

### **Engaging Patient Associations and Professional Networks (T5.2 & T5.3)**

The VRC website will play a key role in the future engagement of patient associations, creating a dedicated Patient & Professional Associations section where organizations can access research updates, event information, and collaboration opportunities. The site will provide a space for patient representatives to share insights, participate in advisory discussions, and contribute to shaping research agendas, ensuring that scientific progress remains responsive to societal needs.

Similarly, the VRC website will support international professional and scientific associations by acting as a key networking tool. Each research department will have a dedicated webpage outlining its focus, participating researchers, and ongoing projects, making it easier for external institutions to identify potential collaborations. The site will also facilitate the co-organization of joint events, allowing international experts to engage with VRC researchers through webinars, workshops, and research partnerships.

## **3 Establishment of the Virtual Research Center (VRC)**

The Alliance4Life Virtual Research Center (VRC) is a collaborative platform for scientists and researchers from partner institutions to exchange knowledge, initiate joint projects, and develop new research directions. The VRC provides structured opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration, skill-building, and resource sharing within the life sciences community.

The development of the VRC followed a structured and phased approach, ensuring that its mission, governance structure, and technical infrastructure aligned with the research needs of the Alliance4Life institutions. The official launch of the VRC took place on February 17, 2025, marking the beginning of a new phase in structured scientific collaboration within the consortium. The launch was accompanied by the first VRC Mini-Conference, which was held in Ljubljana, bringing together researchers, institutional representatives, and external collaborators to present their work and discuss future cooperation.

In the first phase, the VRC was set up with a flexible and scalable structure, allowing for future expansion. The governance model includes:

- A VRC Leader (currently the WP5 leader), responsible for overseeing operations and ensuring alignment with project goals.

- Department leaders, who manage specific research focus areas and coordinate scientific activities, such as webinars, journal clubs, and collaborative research projects.
- Individual researchers and research groups, who can join existing departments or propose new ones through an application process, ensuring an open and growing research ecosystem.

The VRC was designed to evolve organically, allowing partner institutions to propose and establish new research departments based on emerging scientific priorities. This ensures that the structure of the VRC remains responsive to the needs of its researchers and continues to facilitate high-impact scientific collaboration.

### **Governance Structure**

The VRC operates under a rotating directorship to ensure shared leadership and diversity of perspectives. The director is elected every three years by the Alliance4Life Board. The current VRC Director is Associate Professor Sergej Pirkmajer from the University of Ljubljana, serving a term until 2028. Each research department within the VRC also has a dedicated head, who is responsible for driving and organizing collaboration activities, such as webinars, mini-conferences, and collaborative grant proposals.

### **Evolving Research Focus**

The VRC is designed to grow with the needs of its scientific community. If a member of Alliance4Life wishes to establish a new research department, they can submit a New Department Application Form available on the website. Upon approval by the Alliance4Life Board, the department will be officially established, and a director will be appointed to lead its collaborative efforts.

### What can you expect?

As a VRC member, you will have access to scientific events, funding opportunities, and collaboration programs, including:

#### Scientific Activities & Events

**Mini-Conferences** – Annual in-person events where VRC members and external collaborators present their latest findings, fostering new research partnerships.

**Webinars & Scientific Meetings** – Regular virtual discussions led by department directors, featuring expert speakers and panel discussions on emerging topics.

**Journal Club** – Interactive sessions where members discuss recent publications with authors and experts, promoting knowledge exchange across research areas.

**Virtual Courses for PhD Students** – Online skill-building courses designed for early-career researchers, led by senior experts within the VRC.

#### Collaboration & Opportunities

**Seed Fund** – A funding program supporting small-scale collaborative projects, with mentorship from department directors to guide early-stage research initiatives.

**Open Access to Research Infrastructure** – Shared access to laboratory facilities, databases, and specialized tools across VRC departments to enhance research capabilities.

**Job Vacancies** – A network-driven platform for sharing open research positions within the Alliance4Life community.

#### Resources & Knowledge Sharing

**Publications & Reports** – Access to downloadable scientific papers, policy briefs, and project reports.

**Templates & Guidelines** – Presentation templates, grant writing guides, and event planning materials to support research and communication.

**Data Sharing & GDPR Compliance** – Best practices and guidelines for secure data sharing and ethical collaboration.

#### Societal Engagement

**Patient & Professional Associations** – Members are encouraged to connect with patient organizations and professional bodies, ensuring that research aligns with societal needs.

**Advisory Group Involvement** – Opportunities to engage patient representatives in the research process through advisory roles, strengthening the real-world impact of scientific work.

### The Role of the VRC Website in Supporting Growth

The VRC website (D5.1) was developed as an integral part of the VRC's establishment, ensuring that researchers and stakeholders have seamless access to collaboration opportunities, research resources, and institutional engagement mechanisms. The website serves as the primary interface for participation in the VRC, providing a structured and interactive platform for research networking.

#### The initial version (1.0) of the website includes:

- **Mission Statement and Governance Information** – Clearly outlining the objectives of the VRC and its structure.
- **Research Departments** – Dedicated pages for each department, featuring descriptions, research focus, participating researchers, and collaboration opportunities.

- **Announcements and Noticeboard** – A space for important updates, including news about upcoming scientific events and research initiatives.
- **Application Forms for Joining or Creating New Departments** – Allowing researchers to either integrate into existing departments or propose new ones.

While version 1.0 of the website provided the foundational elements for the VRC, the platform will undergo continuous development to enhance its capabilities. Planned future features include:

- **Public and Member-Only Areas** – A restricted-access section will be developed to provide internal collaboration tools such as discussion forums, project management tools, and shared document repositories.
- **Integration of Internal Collaboration Tools** – Discussion forums, secure file-sharing, and interactive workspaces for research teams.
- **Expanded Scientific Networking Features** – Additional tools for hosting webinars, video conferencing, and interactive knowledge-sharing sessions.
- **Comprehensive Job and Funding Opportunities Section** – A dedicated area for job postings, funding calls, and collaborative grant applications.
- **Patient and Professional Associations Engagement** – Features allowing patient organizations and external stakeholders to connect with researchers and participate in scientific discussions.
- **Advanced Search Capabilities** – Enabling users to locate research units, experts, publications, and collaboration opportunities efficiently.

The Virtual Research Center represents a significant advancement in Alliance4Life’s strategy to strengthen research collaboration and support the development of a joint research agenda. The VRC website was developed alongside the center itself, ensuring that it fully aligns with its objectives and provides a comprehensive digital infrastructure for scientific networking and engagement.

As the VRC expands, the website will evolve to accommodate new research departments, integrate additional collaboration tools, and enhance engagement with external partners. This flexible and scalable approach ensures that the VRC continues to serve as a dynamic and sustainable platform, fostering scientific excellence, institutional cooperation, and interdisciplinary research collaboration across the Alliance4Life consortium.

## 4 Development of Virtual Research Center Website

The development of the Virtual Research Center (VRC) website was carried out in parallel with the establishment of the VRC itself, ensuring that the platform was tailored to meet the specific needs of the center and its users. The website was designed as an integral part of the VRC’s structure, providing a digital space for research collaboration, networking, and strategic alignment of joint research efforts within the Alliance4Life consortium.

The development process began with the technical and organizational setup of the VRC, which included defining its mission, governance model, and departmental structures. This phase was essential for identifying the core functionalities required for the website, ensuring that it would effectively support the operational needs of the research departments and facilitate collaboration across member institutions.

Following the establishment of the VRC framework, the VRC webpage (D5.1) was implemented and integrated into the Alliance4Life web portal. This integration ensured that the platform was accessible, user-friendly, and aligned with the broader digital infrastructure of Alliance4Life. The webpage was designed to offer structured access to research activities, scientific events, and funding opportunities, making it a central hub for virtual collaboration.

Throughout the development process, engagement with researchers and stakeholders was a priority. Members of the VRC were actively involved in defining research priorities, collaboration mechanisms, and the types of resources needed on the platform. This participatory approach ensured that the website's design, navigation, and content reflected the real needs of the scientific community.

The VRC website was also developed to support key networking activities, such as mini-conferences, webinars, and journal clubs, allowing researchers to connect, exchange ideas, and establish new collaborations. Additionally, the platform was designed to facilitate joint research strategies, including the Seed Fund initiative and the development of grant collaboration opportunities, further enhancing its role as a catalyst for scientific cooperation.

As the Virtual Research Center continues to evolve, the website will be regularly updated and expanded, incorporating additional features and interactive tools to support long-term engagement. This iterative development approach ensures that the platform remains relevant, functional, and aligned with the strategic goals of the VRC and the Alliance4Life consortium.

## 5 VRC Webpage Features

The Virtual Research Center (VRC) website was developed as a dedicated digital platform to support the activities and objectives of the VRC. The goal was to create a user-friendly, well-structured, and interactive environment where researchers from Alliance4Life institutions could engage in joint research activities, access collaboration opportunities, and participate in networking events. The website was designed to serve as a central hub for scientific exchange, ensuring that the VRC functions efficiently and remains accessible to all stakeholders.

The development process focused on creating a clear and intuitive structure that would allow users to navigate seamlessly through different sections. The website provides detailed information about the VRC's mission, research departments, scientific events, funding opportunities, and knowledge-sharing resources. Key sections include:

**Homepage:** A dynamic landing page featuring an introduction to the VRC, call-to-action buttons for participation, and a rotating banner with key announcements, such as upcoming webinars and funding calls.



**Research Departments:** Dedicated pages for each thematic research area, including Neurobiology, Cardiovascular Diseases, Metabolism and endocrinology of skeletal muscle . Each department page provides an overview of research activities, lists of participating research groups, ongoing projects, and links to relevant publications.

**Activities & Events:** A regularly updated section that includes information on mini-conferences, scientific webinars, virtual courses for PhD students, and journal club meetings. This feature enables researchers to register for events, access session recordings, and engage in scientific discussions.

**Collaboration Opportunities:** A structured overview of available resources, such as the Seed Fund program, open access to infrastructure, and job opportunities within Alliance4Life institutions. This section encourages researchers to develop joint research projects and apply for funding.

**News & Success Stories:** A space dedicated to highlighting research achievements, new collaborations, and testimonials from VRC participants. This feature increases the visibility of the VRC's impact and success.

**Resources & Knowledge Sharing:** A repository of scientific publications, policy briefs, research guidelines, and templates to support collaborative efforts. The website also provides information on data-sharing practices and GDPR compliance to ensure ethical and secure research cooperation.

**Member Portal (to be implemented in the next phase):** A restricted-access section that will provide tools for internal collaboration, such as discussion forums, project management tools, and shared document repositories.

The technical development of the website focused on ensuring accessibility, responsiveness, and seamless integration with the broader Alliance4Life web portal. Features such as integrated video streaming for webinars, newsletter subscriptions, and secure user authentication were incorporated to enhance engagement and usability.

As the Virtual Research Center continues to evolve, the website will also grow to accommodate new research departments, expanded functionalities, and additional networking tools. The flexible and scalable design of the platform ensures that it can adapt to the natural growth of the VRC, supporting its mission to foster long-term scientific collaboration and knowledge exchange within the Alliance4Life network.

## 6 Future Development of the Website

The Virtual Research Center (VRC) website will continue to evolve alongside the growth of the VRC itself, ensuring that it remains a dynamic and functional platform for research collaboration. Future development will focus on expanding research activities, improving digital tools, engaging external stakeholders, and ensuring long-term sustainability.

### Enhancing Researcher Engagement and Virtual Collaboration

One of the primary next steps for the VRC website is to expand its activities and increase researcher engagement through the integration of regular virtual events, interactive forums,

and networking tools. The platform will host an increasing number of scientific webinars, journal club meetings, and thematic workshops, ensuring continuous interaction between researchers across Alliance4Life institutions. Additionally, new interactive features will be developed to support virtual collaboration, including discussion boards, shared document repositories, and dedicated project workspaces. These enhancements will strengthen the usability of the website as a research networking tool, making it easier for researchers to initiate and manage collaborative projects.

### **Integration of the Seed Fund Initiative**

The website will also play a key role in the implementation of the Seed Fund Initiative, which is designed to support small-scale collaborative projects. A dedicated Seed Fund section will be integrated into the platform, providing researchers with access to funding calls, application guidelines, and submission portals. This will enable research teams to develop preliminary data and build strong foundations for larger grant applications, particularly those aligned with Horizon Europe funding opportunities.

### **Open Access to Research Infrastructure**

To further enhance scientific collaboration, the VRC website will facilitate open access to research infrastructure across the consortium. This feature will allow researchers to identify and utilize core facilities within Alliance4Life institutions, promoting cross-institutional cooperation. The website will also include guidelines for data-sharing compliance with GDPR and FAIR principles, ensuring that research collaborations adhere to ethical and legal standards while maintaining accessibility and security of shared resources.

### **Long-Term Sustainability and Strategic Growth**

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of the VRC is a key priority, and the website will play a central role in maintaining continuous research engagement and institutional cooperation beyond the project's lifecycle. The platform will be regularly updated to reflect evolving research priorities, support new collaborations, and integrate additional research departments as they emerge. Stronger connections with industry, policymakers, and professional organizations will also be fostered through the website, maximizing the impact of the VRC on the broader research and innovation landscape.

As the VRC expands, the website will continue to serve as its primary digital infrastructure, adapting to the changing needs of researchers and stakeholders. By integrating advanced collaboration tools, strategic funding mechanisms, and research infrastructure access, the VRC website will remain a key driver of scientific excellence and cross-institutional cooperation within the Alliance4Life consortium.

## **7 Conclusion**

The establishment of the Virtual Research Center (VRC) within the A4L\_BRIDGE project represents a significant milestone in strengthening scientific collaboration, knowledge exchange, and networking opportunities across Alliance4Life member institutions. The VRC website (D5.1) was developed in parallel with the creation of the VRC itself, ensuring that it

serves as an integral platform for research engagement, fostering interdisciplinary cooperation, joint initiatives, and professional development.

By integrating structured access to research departments, events, and collaboration tools, the website enables researchers to connect, exchange expertise, and participate in joint research efforts. Its functionality supports scientific events such as mini-conferences, webinars, and journal clubs, reinforcing Alliance4Life's commitment to bridging the innovation gap and advancing research excellence. Additionally, the VRC is strategically aligned with key project components such as mentorship programs (WP4), internships (WP8), and the e-learning platform (WP3), maximizing its impact on researcher development and institutional cooperation.

While the initial version (1.0) of the website has established a strong foundation, its development is an ongoing process, with future enhancements planned to expand research collaboration, integrate discussion forums, improve data-sharing mechanisms, and strengthen engagement with external stakeholders. Features such as open access to infrastructure, the Seed Fund initiative, and expanded networking tools will further support researchers in securing funding, accessing shared resources, and building sustainable partnerships.

As the VRC evolves, the website will continue to adapt and expand, ensuring that it remains a relevant, dynamic, and sustainable platform for scientific cooperation within the Alliance4Life consortium. Through continuous refinement, engagement with industry and policymakers, and the integration of innovative digital tools, the VRC website will play a key role in fostering research excellence, strengthening institutional collaboration, and supporting long-term scientific impact across Central and Eastern Europe.

The Alliance4Life VIRTUAL RESEARCH CENTER website is available here: [Virtual Research Center | Alliance4Life](#)