

POSITION

The future of the European Universities Initiative The sector's perspective

April 2020

The European Universities Initiative has been at the centre of many discussions in European higher education and research for the past couple of years. Universities across the continent enthusiastically embraced the pilot phase launched by the European Commission in 2018 and the initiative is developing against a highly dynamic policy backdrop.

Deepening transnational university collaboration has great potential to strengthen European higher education and research and its international competitiveness, as well as European cooperation. European collaboration and solidarity are of ever greater importance due to the coronavirus crisis. Strengthening Europe's innovation capacity, to which universities contribute greatly, will be crucial for recovery and for building a sustainable future.

EUA supports the European Universities Initiative and calls for a balanced and focused approach in its future development. It must be clear in its goals and limitations and be well embedded in the framework of European policies and instruments for higher education and research collaboration. Such an approach should be based on the evidence that Europe's universities generate during the pilot phase, through thorough evaluation. The goal should be to build an open, flexible and sustainable instrument that works to the benefit of European higher education and research as a whole.

EUA EVIDENCE

In early 2020, EUA conducted a survey on international strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative that gathered responses from 219 higher education institutions from 34 systems across Europe. The results provide a broad view on international collaborations as well as first insights into the perceptions and experiences of higher education institutions in the European Universities Initiative. Together with evidence from other indicated sources, these results are included as illustrations for the key points in the boxes below.

On behalf of its more than 800 members, representing the breadth of European higher education institutions in 48 countries, and on the basis of the aforementioned survey results, EUA calls on the European Commission, the EU Member States in Council and the European Parliament to consider the following seven points for the future development of the initiative.

1. The European Universities Initiative must be seen as an additional way to explore strategic cooperation, identify challenges and propose solutions

EUA calls on governments and policy makers responsible for higher education and research to work together to address and eventually remove remaining obstacles and work towards greater compatibility of systems across Europe. This must build on the work that has already been done and that continues in the framework of the Bologna Process and the European Research Area.

EUA survey 2020:

68% of universities perceive legal obstacles as a challenge to participation in the European Universities Initiative, specifically with regard to the accreditation of joint programmes. 59% cite administrative obstacles to collaboration, due to different institutional structures and processes.

The core of the European Universities Initiative is building deep, strategic alliances between universities. Its scale and high level of ambition make it well suited also as a testbed to identify and highlight challenges and obstacles to transnational cooperation. This can lead to new discoveries and innovation in higher education cooperation, with benefits for learning and teaching, research, innovation and university engagement with society.

The European Universities Initiative can thus give an additional push towards system-level reforms, driven by policy processes such as the Bologna Process to the benefit of all. The Initiative can also be helpful in facilitating a better coordination between European higher education and research policies. Those processes and reforms must always be informed by broad evidence from the sector taking into account the various modes of collaboration and related challenges. In this regard, it is important to clarify the links and determine the boundaries between the European Universities Initiative and the broader debate about the “universities of the future” that is currently emerging at the European level.

2. The alliances must have leeway to be innovative and creative

EUA calls on EU policy makers, national and regional governments to give the alliances under the European Universities Initiative as much leeway as possible to develop their cooperation, while member states and regions are improving the connectivity of their systems for all of their universities.

EUA survey 2020:

88% of responding higher education institutions underline the bottom-up nature of the initiative and would like to keep the room for manoeuvre as open as possible.

As most of the fundamental next steps towards a better connectivity between university systems in Europe rely on opening up national and regional framework conditions, the European Commission must avoid overloading the networks with additional policy requirements. Universities very much welcome the opportunity of the pilot calls to develop a common strategy and profile through alliances. These alliances should now be able to concentrate on developing good practice examples for cooperation which can be inspiring for others as well. They need sufficient room for manoeuvre to act freely and creatively.

3. The diverse ways of collaborating must be preserved

EUA calls for future EU funding programmes to preserve and enhance the diversity of collaboration models among higher education institutions. Providing further funding for the European Universities Initiative is very important, but it should not come at the expense of other types of cooperation that are already underfunded in the current programmes. Sufficient and sustainable funding is needed for all types of collaborations as they are equally important for a strong and diverse European higher education landscape.

EUA survey 2020 and Erasmus+ membership consultation 2016:

99% of respondents in the 2020 survey participate in Erasmus+ mobility for staff and students and 83% are engaged in Erasmus+ collaboration projects. These international partnership opportunities will continue to be of high importance to European higher education institutions. This applies to all project collaboration actions under Erasmus+ (see [EUA data from 2016](#)). Yet they remain underfunded and low success rates can deter universities from applying.

There are many ways of collaborating transnationally. Several models of cooperation have existed for many years through different frameworks. This diversity is a strength for Europe: It allows different institutional profiles to develop together, responding to different needs. This diversity must be nurtured through equality of esteem and sufficient financial support for all the different models. This diversity must be harnessed to strengthen the European Higher Education and Research Areas.

4. The initiative must encompass all university missions in a bottom-up approach

EUA argues for joint calls for the European Universities Initiative under the next generation of EU funding programmes (2021-2027) facilitating synergies between all missions. This is important to foster a coherent and balanced approach towards the development of the alliances. The joint calls should be structured in a way that allows each applying alliance to choose its focus in a bottom-up approach. Depending on the profile of the institutions involved and the distinct goals of the alliance, emphasis may be put on one specific mission, while bearing in mind that the overall objective of the instrument is to strengthen the links between the different missions.

EUA survey 2020:

Enhancing the quality of learning and teaching is seen as a top benefit, with 98% of respondents indicating it to be very or somewhat important. Strengthening the links between education, research and innovation is another highly rated benefit. It is considered very or somewhat important by 93% of respondents.

Furthermore, 88% state that it is very or somewhat important for the future of the European University Initiative to develop the research dimension of the alliances.

The university missions of education, research, innovation and culture reinforce each other. Research-based learning and teaching, co-creation with non-academic partners in the innovation ecosystem, and a continuous dialogue with society are all at the heart of the university.

Many of the alliances choose a challenge-based approach for their collaboration, addressing major issues such as sustainable development. This is only possible by combining and creating synergies between all university missions.

The European Universities Initiative must support the mutual strengthening of all missions while giving flexibility and respecting the diversity of institutional profiles and the goals of the individual alliances.

5. Fostering cohesion within Europe and contributing to competitiveness must be key objectives

EUA calls for national and regional governments and other relevant actors to use the enabling conditions and thematic concentration of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) towards research, education and innovation. ESIF funds are useful in building capacity for regions with lower intensity in research and innovation and in making investments that can contribute to creating a level playing field for universities. This may ultimately also support broader participation of universities in EU programmes in general, including the European Universities Initiative, the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, as well as new future programmes such as Digital Europe.

Results of the first European Universities Initiative pilot call:

While the selection results of the first pilot call of the European Universities Initiative showed widespread participation covering all regions across Europe, a few countries are not represented despite having a considerable number of higher education institutions. Other countries have a relatively low representation among the successful alliances given the size of their systems.

The European Universities Initiative has great potential to connect excellence, knowledge and expertise and spread good practices between universities in order to build capacity across Europe and beyond. Therefore, universities from all parts of Europe should have the possibility to participate in the Initiative. Close collaboration across Europe can enhance the quality of all university missions, provided that the universities have framework conditions that allow them to develop and adopt good practices. Building widespread capacity in education, research and innovation in order to help narrow Europe's innovation gap and counteract unbalanced mobility between countries, sectors and regions, must be a major objective of the initiative.

6. Participation should be further opened to promote international competitiveness

EUA calls for the possibility to allow partners from outside the EU and Erasmus+ Programme countries to participate in the European Universities Initiative in ways that strengthen the alliances and the international competitiveness of European higher education and research. The collaboration framework should allow for a flexible approach to including partners from other countries, in particular members of the Bologna Process, with their own funds or support through other funding lines of EU programmes.

EUA survey 2020:

For 60% of respondents it is very or somewhat important to broaden the geographical scope of the European Universities Initiative from current EU and Erasmus+ partner countries and allow participation of further countries, while 40% are neutral or do not find it that important at this stage.

79% of respondents have ongoing collaborations with partners in Europe outside the EU.

While the Initiative is focused on strengthening the higher education and research systems in the EU, it is important to acknowledge the strong ties between universities in Europe beyond EU borders and internationally.

7. Long-term sustainability requires continued political and financial support

EUA calls for EU funding programme rules to be further simplified and aligned to facilitate synergies between different kinds of instruments. National governments must ensure that the framework conditions for universities are beneficial to long-term deep transnational cooperation. This requires sufficient core funding for all institutions and a coordinated approach towards co-funding for the alliances under the European Universities Initiative. Alliances selected under the pilot calls must be able to apply for follow-up funding to continue their work.

EUA survey 2020:

73% of respondents call for follow-up grants for successful alliances beyond the first three years funded by the pilot calls. In addition, 53% recommend increased synergies with other EU funding programmes. 48% call for systematic national co-funding to enhance the European University Initiative in the future EU programme period.

The long-term sustainability of the European Universities Initiative will depend on its added value for the universities involved, as well as for the system as a whole. Systems that allow close cooperation, as well as exchange and implementation of innovative practices, will ensure that the results of the initiative will grow in the future. This means that obstacles towards cross-border collaboration must be removed and funding must be sufficient and sustainable, including through synergies and complementarities between national funding and the various EU programmes that support universities. National rectors conferences' can play an important role in facilitating dialogue at the national level.

It is important that a thorough evaluation takes place after the three-year pilot phase with the broad involvement of stakeholders, including the alliances themselves, as well as higher education institutions and sector representatives outside the alliances, in order to adjust further where needed.