

POLICY INPUT

European Universities Initiative: Towards holistically assessing overall progress

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After the pilot phase – what next?

To properly measure the progress of the [European Universities Initiative](#), a holistic approach that focuses on real added value for universities and their communities is essential.

As the pilot phase of the European Universities Initiative has concluded, discussions about how to best measure the progress made towards the overall goals of the initiative are beginning, between the European Commission, member states and stakeholders.

Thus far, discussions on the development of an indicator framework to measure the achievements of the alliances have been too focused on quantitative measurements. Rather, the assessment must take a holistic approach.

Besides what has been achieved through the initiative's transnational university alliances, this exercise must consider [the barriers and obstacles that universities face when developing such forms of deep transnational cooperation](#). In addition to the regulatory barriers, it should also be noted that differences in university funding levels and frameworks pose a challenge for cooperation and affect progress towards the goals. The evaluation should also include monitoring of new policy measures at national level that facilitate cooperation, as part of the analysis and evaluation of the progress made towards the implementation of the [Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective higher education cooperation, from April 2022](#). Furthermore, the suitability of the funding instruments used to support alliances must be assessed, taking into account the outcomes of the ongoing Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe mid-term evaluations.

Key considerations

- Monitoring overall progress towards the policy goals of the initiative as a whole will only be valuable if a structured mapping of the challenges and obstacles is developed in parallel. This will provide a better understanding of why progress may be slower or more difficult in certain areas.
- A policy monitoring tool must not be confused with nor turned into a benchmarking tool that compares alliances. Individual alliances are assessed as part of their contractual obligations for EU funding and based on their individual strategic goals and vision. Terms like “standard” or “criteria” should be avoided here, as they come from other areas, such as quality assurance and the Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), where they serve a different purpose.
- The selected method for measuring progress and impact must explain how collaboration in alliances is expected to lead to specific change, by drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence. This can be a complex matter, as besides participating in an alliance, universities collaborate at many levels and in diverse formats with partners in Europe and internationally. It is important that the timeframe is realistic and acknowledges the time needed to implement complex institutional transformation processes.

- Any indicator framework must have clear definitions (e.g. a joint programme is not the same as a joint degree, and the former does not necessarily lead to the latter) and be tested for relevance, validity, feasibility and reliability. Given the complexity of multilateral cooperation, attention must be paid to the difficulty of finding proxies that can adequately measure what they are supposed to measure.
- Data collection should combine quantitative and qualitative methods and should not create an excessive additional burden for universities. It is important to keep data collection focused and meaningful; not all that is measurable will necessarily be useful for the indicator framework. This is all the more vital as the indicator framework is only being developed after the pilot phase. Usually - for reasons of transparency, progress or performance - indicators are established at the outset, alongside the goals.
- Duplication of data collection exercises should be avoided and where possible data from pre-existing tools such as the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) should be used.
- Results must be presented alongside a qualitative analysis in order to provide a better understanding of the impact of cooperation through alliances.
- There must be no automatic link between the outcomes of the monitoring exercise through an indicator framework and future funding for alliances. Such decisions need to be based on a broader perspective, encompassing the bigger picture of EU and national funding for universities, higher education and research, as well as innovation.

Developing deep and large-scale transnational cooperation between universities takes time. In addition, alliance building represents a profound change process. Alliances are one way, among others, to achieve the overall goals of the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area - in line with universities' missions. For all types of cooperation, it is important to keep its academic purpose and vision in focus. Furthermore, to enable universities to further develop cooperation in line with their institutional mission and strategy, there is a need to overcome regulatory barriers, further implement reforms at national level and [grant universities enough institutional autonomy](#) and sustainable funding.