

Empowering excellence: European Universities Alliances as laboratories for success stories

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CESAER, the strong and united voice of universities of science and technology in Europe, welcomes ongoing efforts to advance the development of the European Universities initiative.

Since the start of the 2018 pilot call for European Universities within the Erasmus+ programme, our association has been a vocal supporter and advocate for an initiative driven by its partner universities. This includes through the publications:

- [Statement on European Universities](#) (December 2018)
- [On European Universities](#) (October 2019)
- [Evaluation of European university alliances pilot](#) (April 2020)
- [Vision for the European Education Area \(EEA\)](#) (April 2020)
- [Advancing the flagship initiatives of the European Strategy for Universities](#) (March 2022).

In light of the Erasmus+ mid-term review, the recent EU higher education package, and the ongoing strategic considerations for the next EU long-term budget and future funding programmes, we are at a crucial juncture to shape the future of the European Universities initiative. We have previously expressed our support for the initiative's ambitious goal to "develop and share a common long-term, sustainable, and systemic cooperation on education, research, and innovation". As we transition from the start-up phase, it becomes imperative to secure the sustainable financial support required to fulfil these high ambitions.

This position provides guidance for the future of European Universities Alliances along three dimensions: (i) enhance long-term vision and strategic priorities, (ii) elaborate next steps and take forward the efforts of partner universities, (iii) support Alliances from the local to global level.

1) Enhance long-term vision and strategic priorities

European Universities Alliances serve as both an opportunity and a tool for universities to enhance their overall mission of education, research and innovation. The ongoing implementation of the European Strategy for Universities should strive to bolster the European research and higher education sector's capacity to lead globally by addressing persistent obstacles to seamless transnational collaboration in education, innovation, and research. In this context, we welcome the recommendation laid out in the [Letta Report](#) to implement the fifth freedom, which entails embedding research, innovation and education drivers at the core of the Single Market, thereby fostering an ecosystem where knowledge diffusion propels economic vitality, societal advancement and cultural enlightenment.

Strategic and policy developments should pivot around the central question, "How does this support building excellence at partner universities in advancing their broader societal mission?". Alliances stand to gain by ensuring that a long-term vision, extending well beyond 2027, is developed in line with the above. This vision should be designed using a lifecycle approach and co-created with European institutions and national and regional governments.

The added value of Alliances for stakeholders in partner universities, including students, academics, staff, and leadership, in addition to stakeholders in society, should be identified, outlined, and communicated. An effective governance model is crucial to achieving these goals and is closely tied to the challenge of balancing the institutional autonomy of each individual partner university with the pooled autonomy and future of an Alliance. This balance involves ensuring the position of universities as independent entities, with a voluntary choice of participation and commitment towards Alliances, ensuring that each partner university's role in an Alliance is significant.

While the current focus is primarily on the strategic partnerships within Alliances, it is important to consider that the modes of institutional cooperation, and educational and research approaches developed within this framework can also flourish outside of Alliances. This includes other initiatives or long-standing partnerships, such as networks and associations, that our Members participate in and which offer unique ways of internationalisation. In light of this, the Alliances can positively impact broader ecosystems and landscapes, extending well beyond the partner universities.

2) Elaborate next steps and take forward the efforts of partner universities

Alliances hold a unique potential to pioneer new methods of long-term structural and systemic cooperation across Europe covering the complete mission of education, research and innovation. They currently enjoy visibility and political support at the EU level and in many member states.

Alliances should not be confined to a 'one size fits all' approach, nor should each Alliance be viewed as a mean to deliver every aspect of the European Strategy for Universities. Instead, Alliances should be encouraged to adopt their unique high-risk, high-gain experimental approaches, transforming Alliances into laboratories for knowledge development, learning across barriers and establishing good practice.

Alliances should be empowered to undertake an iterative experimental cycle, allowing them to abandon areas that do not work and communicate these as 'lessons learned'. This benefits the entire community, including universities not participating in an Alliance, and other institutionalised cooperation models. The focus should be on areas where there is the most value-add and continuing experimentation to explore ways to scale-up such success stories. This objective necessitates a shift from a project-based to a programme-based approach, and it could be beneficial to explore the possibility of involving or expanding the roles of associated partners in Alliances' actions.

The monitoring framework and the results of the Science with and for Society (SwafS) projects should function as a tool to identify lessons learned, good practices and success stories, supporting the analysis of what works and what does not, the factors underpinning success or failure, and what can and cannot be scaled up and replicated by different types of institutionalised cooperation models. Other types of outcomes from any monitoring

framework should be treated with caution as they may overlook the challenges faced by Alliances and their partner universities individually, and overemphasise priorities supported by external funding to Alliances. This is especially important to extend the benefit of the Alliances beyond its participants.

For a broader impact, the concept of Alliances needs to be disseminated within all levels and pillars of university activities, including research, education and innovation, in the societal ecosystems where the universities and alliances are interweaved. To enhance the competitiveness of Europe and its leadership in science and technology, a holistic, strategic, and long-term vision for the Alliances is needed. 'Holistic' here means addressing all university missions, to uphold the ambition of the European Universities initiative, which is centred around creating models for the universities of the future as an important part of the complete European ecosystem.

In relation to the educational mission, we call upon the European Commission and member states to create a funding pathway for the sustainable development of Alliances. This can be achieved through open and competitive long-term funding under the successor to the Erasmus+ programme as part of the next EU long-term budget. Such initiatives should facilitate the development of Alliances while guaranteeing the execution of both traditional and innovative teaching and learning activities. Additionally, it should ensure the incorporation of various forms of physical mobility, which are crucial to the success of the Erasmus+ programme.

In addition to the European Education Area, universities and Alliances play an important role in realising the European Research Area and contributing to the European Innovation Agenda, thereby covering the complete mission of universities. In order to complete the ambitions, Alliances should be empowered to leverage their unique consortia structures to receive funding from the European framework programme for research and innovation to support and strengthen the advancement of the European Research Area through the ERA priorities elaborated in the ERA policy agenda, by accelerating institutional change and advancing institutional policies. In line with this, we warmly welcome the European Excellence Initiative (EEI) included in 'Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area' of Work Programme 2023-2025 of Horizon Europe and call for the continuation of the EEI.

In our [FP10 paper](#) from December 2023, we emphasised the importance of maintaining open and competitive calls as the standard for awarding funding in FP10, mirroring the successful approach of Horizon Europe. This strategy is crucial for Horizon Europe and its successor to continue leading the way in advancing cutting-edge science and technology across the full knowledge value chain.

We also stress that there is an immediate need for separate, dedicated financial support for Alliances during a transition period. This financial support should aim to boost the Alliances' capacity to conduct joint research and innovation activities. By the end of the transition period, Alliances will be in a stronger position to apply for regular funding from relevant programmes, including the framework programme for research & innovation.

We urge the EU institutions, led by the European Commission and its departments working together (DG EAC, DG RTD, DG REGIO, and others), to develop the necessary financial

support mechanisms collaboratively with member states. This effort should leverage funding sources at EU, national, and regional levels.

3) Support Alliances from the local to global level

Supporting institutions, including EU institutions and national and regional governments, should empower Alliances to engage in activities fulfilling the complete missions of universities. The education mission should be further explored through innovative educational methods and collaborative study programs over Europe. This can be achieved by ensuring favourable funding conditions and permissive legal frameworks, which are crucial for driving progress and educational excellence.

Alliances benefit from converting their priorities into tangible objectives with realistic key performance indicators that match their varying levels of ambition. In addition, to enable them to reach their ambition, it is essential to identify funding gaps and funding needs to implement their priorities, including by clarifying 'in-kind contributions' of the partners, addressing the fragmented support landscape and challenging framework and legal conditions. A common mobility window can be instrumental in advancing these goals.

There are long-standing challenges for Alliances that need to be addressed at both the EU and member state levels. These include implementing legal and system-level reforms on the recognition of degrees and quality assurance systems. These reforms would simplify the establishment of joint programmes, and for seamless mobility, issues that were only partially addressed through the Bologna process. Furthermore, it is crucial to carefully consider terminology to clearly distinguish between joint programmes, joint degrees, and joint diplomas.

Concerted discussions are vital for ongoing explorations and potential future developments around Joint European Degrees and labels. Existing initiatives, supported as a European policy experimentation piloting a joint European Degree label, are key sources of inspiration and input. These initiatives should play a central role in both the envisioned Forum and the Policy Lab.

We value initiatives that enhance the consistency of funding for research and higher education institutions at both national and regional levels. A crucial element is the prompt implementation of the 3% GDP target for research and innovation, complemented by a 1.25% GDP public effort target, as suggested by the European Commission. The aim is for all member states to achieve these targets by 2030 in a coordinated EU effort. Given the current disparities in funding across Europe, it is particularly important to ensure that all member states swiftly meet these targets to establish an equitable environment. This is especially significant for institutions that are part of Alliances and other similar institutionalised cooperation models.

To foster global leadership through Alliances, it is essential to utilise the full potential of our continent, including the United Kingdom and Switzerland. Engaging universities from non-'Erasmus partner countries' as full consortium partners is crucial. We applaud the inclusion of Swiss and UK universities in several Alliances. We acknowledge that EU funding is governed by specific rules and legislation. We emphasise the need for maximum flexibility and facilitation within this framework, particularly when Alliance-related events and activities are hosted by partner universities in the UK and Switzerland. We urge the European

Commission to eliminate barriers to participation and provide necessary facilitation to leverage the full strength of our continent. Adopting such a strategy is crucial for the development of globally relevant Alliances.

Our offer

Universities of science and technology are important institutions contributing to addressing local and global challenges. Our Members are active across the full range of EU funding programmes related to education, research and innovation, collaborating with industry and the private sector, the public sector and other research and higher education institutions.

Our association remains committed to actively and constructively shaping the European Universities initiative. We recognise that the Alliances foster tangible collaboration in research, education, and innovation, including through the circulation of learners, teachers and researchers. This collaboration is funded by a variety of sources, including direct funding from EU institutions and other external sources and, in some instances, internal sources.

CESAER plays a crucial complementary role by focusing on advocacy and serving as the independent voice of its Members, exclusively supported by its Members. As the only actor that serves as the strong and united voice of over 50 universities of science & technology across all of Europe, we offer a platform for our Members to consolidate their experiences as partner universities across 15 different Alliances. We stand ready to continue serving as a pivotal forum at the intersection of universities of science & technology, the European Strategy for Universities and the future of Alliances.

For more information and enquiries, please [contact](#) our Secretary General Mattias Björnmalm.

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