

# Shaping European universities of the future

The Guild's recommendations for  
the European Universities initiative

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## Introduction

The Guild welcomes the European Universities initiative as a way of strengthening and deepening existing successful university collaborations, and as an opportunity to form new partnerships across Europe. The initiative must bring about a step-change for the Bologna process, and foster flagship initiatives boosting outstanding quality in education and research excellence. At the same time, it can build on the role of universities as engines for innovation and policy impact. These communities of universities can further reinforce the interchange between research, teaching and innovation, and strengthen the institutional excellence through the exchange of people, knowledge and ideas in a trusted space. Establishing deeper collaboration will also have great opportunity to foster European identities and contribute to the education of more internationally minded and flexible work force.

The European Universities initiative will enable universities to jointly develop new and transformative strategies for becoming “universities of the future”, through networks that each have their unique selling points and a mission to act as models for the university sector.

**The Guild makes the following recommendations for a successful European universities initiative:**

### 1. University networks must be built on clear strategic objectives and committed leadership

For European Universities to be effective, they need a clear strategic focus, and a strong commitment to deliver on their objectives. To maximise the impact of the clusters of European universities, it's crucial that they share a joint vision for the future, and that the underlying objectives of organisational integration and of creating educational quality are defined from the beginning. The networks must be governed with maximum effectiveness and minimum extra bureaucracy. The governance of the network could be based on regular meetings by the university leaderships, which would take ownership of the network's success. The Guild opposes creating new layers of management above the university leadership.

It is also essential that the networks demonstrate commitment from the leadership level, but at the same time empower the whole university to be part of the co-creation of the network. To distinguish themselves from traditional types of university partnerships, networks of European universities should commit to the creation of a common pool of physical, virtual, intellectual and administrative resources to be used by their communities.

## 2. European Universities initiative requires the long-term commitment of universities, governments and the EU

In order to be successful, the initiative must be bold and ambitious and build on a concerted action from universities, governments and EU institutions. The support should not only cover the provision of long-term funding, but also a commitment to achieve mutual recognition of degrees and resolve barriers to mobility as well as differences in quality assurance that exist between many European countries. The governments and national agencies should enable enough flexibility for the piloting of solutions leading to the interoperability of regulatory environments.

It is essential that the initiative will cover all EU Member States as well as Associated Countries. To guarantee the commitment of the university management, universities could participate in co-funding activities related to the creation of the networks.

## 3. Funding for European Universities must maximise opportunities for bottom-up initiative

The collaborations and relationships on which the European Universities will be founded will take time to develop, and their added value will increase proportionally over time. For the initiative to be successful and deliver sustainable structures of collaboration, it is crucial that the EU, Member States and Associated Countries commit to offering long-term funding that goes well beyond the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework for 2021-2027. The Guild recommends that support for the scheme will be designed for at least 10 years, with a mid-term review after the first 5 years.

Funding for the initiative should offer flexibility for the participants to develop a variety of different cooperation models. It is important that the initiative can support networks at each stage of their development, so that it enables more mature networks to reach a new stage on their collaboration, whilst also encouraging the creation of new collaborations. The initiative should be welcoming a broad range of networks, by encouraging them to set goals that are ambitious in relation to their existing activities. This should be reflected in the funding stream dedicated to the European Universities initiative. The Guild suggests that the budget

for each network would be at least 5 million euro per year, with the total amount depending on their strategic objectives and level of ambition.

Besides the funding dedicated to this initiative, the scheme should maximise the benefits from existing funding programmes that already provide support for education, research and innovation. It's important that the networks of European universities are offered the freedom to design and prioritise the content of their collaboration, which will be funded through a combination of existing and new funding instruments. The networks could foster, for example, the following types of activities:

- Student and staff mobility.
- Development of educational content and innovative pedagogies (curricula development for courses, joint programmes, summer schools, online modules and entrepreneurship training).
- Initiating research and innovation activities: mobility of researchers and professors, as well as developing future research perspectives and enhancing collaboration in specific fields.
- Collaboration at management level, and enhancing university governance through leadership training and exchanges amongst professional services staff.
- Promoting access to research infrastructure, as well as the development of joint infrastructures (such as laboratories, digital infrastructures etc).
- Initiatives related to societal engagement (civil mission of universities, relations with societal actors, citizen science and open science).

## 4. European Universities initiative should support networks with different compositions and stages of development

The Guild supports the creation of 20 networks of European universities by 2024, and recommends that each of them will be formed with a bottom-up principle. In this way, the initiative should cover networks based on institutions as a whole, as well as thematic or challenge-based networks consisting of subject areas that are excellent in their field.

The initiative should allow room for flexibility in terms of the number of institutions participating in

each network, with three institutions from different EU Member States or associated countries being the minimum size of the networks. However, as a general rule a partnership of four to six member universities would offer an ideal setting to enable intensive cooperation and feasible management of the network. Whilst supporting the pan-European nature of the initiative, The Guild opposes the use of geographical balance of the consortium as an evaluation criterion.

To maximise their outreach and impact on the European higher education sector, the networks of European universities should be open and transparent, serving as models for other university networks. The networks included in the scheme should commit to sharing best practices outside their own communities, and fostering collaboration with other networks of European universities.

### **5. The initiative should be ambitious in defining added value and quality for education**

Promoting integration between European universities could bring the most comprehensive added value through structured mobility paths for students up to PhD level, as well as for researchers, professors and administrative staff. The networks will form good test-beds for the development of blended mobility, in which physical mobility of varying length is combined with digital cooperative projects and distance-learning courses. In addition, the initiative offers a valuable opportunity to use political support to overcome differences in national legislation that often stand in the way of creating successful joint degrees. Developing joint degrees offers a guarantee for high-quality mobility experiences and transferability of credits, and it enables overcoming administrative and financial barriers. In order to be successful, joint or dual degrees should be truly innovative by offering programmes with a new and interdisciplinary approaches that could not be implemented by an individual university.

However, collaboration and mobility cannot be seen as the ultimate goals for the European universities initiative. To maximise the impact of the clusters of European universities, it is crucial that objectives related to improved quality in education and the ways of reaching those goals are defined by each network from the beginning. Setting

objectives and evaluating success with relevant indicators are important aspects of the new European universities initiative. The networks should demonstrate quality, ambition as well as innovativeness in forming a deeper community of universities. For this purpose, robust quality indicators should be adopted especially in the field of education. Whilst the Guild recommends that the initiative should have a bottom-up approach to quality, following indicators could be considered as examples of measuring the success of the networks:

- Number of joint courses and programmes.
- Share of students engaged in mobility and in joint or dual courses.
- Share of academic and administrative staff engaged in mobility.
- Number of joint research projects and joint high-level publications.

As analysing quantitative data often provides limited insights into the quality of collaboration, it is important to measure the success of networks with qualitative indicators. These could include for example the improvement of international or intercultural competences of staff and students, new initiatives promoting inclusiveness towards foreign students, added value created through interdisciplinarity, the presence of a community of scholars growing from a network, the improvement of digital skills etc.

The evaluation of the proposals to establish networks of European universities, as well as the mid-term evaluation of their development should be done through new panels of experts representing the university sector with high-level competences in developing university partnerships.

### **6. Networks of European Universities should strengthen research excellence**

By contributing to the building of the European Research Area, mobility leads to a shared European space for research and innovation and the improvement of research quality and impact. The networks can build on complementary strengths and exposure to different research environments that enable accomplishing targets that cannot be met by an individual university. In addition, deeper collaboration between a cluster of universities will boost the research capacity of universities through

the circulation of ideas and the provision of a trust-based framework of collaboration, that would enable developing existing and new R&I initiatives. In terms of career development of researchers, networks of European universities offer opportunities for collaboration in PhD training and increasing the number of international joint publications.

### **7. Universities must be empowered to create bridges between research, education and innovation**

The networks of European universities could carry the potential of acting as test-beds for developing, testing and exemplifying approaches that create new bridges between research and education. Fostering research-led education within the new networks is essential, for example through exploiting research outcomes in teaching or through engaging undergraduate students with research activities for example in the context of EU-funded collaborative projects. The networks could also pioneer new approaches to, and common standards for doctoral training.

Academic collaboration and structured mobility open various opportunities for developing digital solutions and innovation in teaching and learning. Digital skills play an important role in students' capacity to engage with research-based knowledge, and therefore the new networks should identify, develop and implement aspects related to digitalisation as part of their educational strategies.

A dialogue between different perspectives fostered in a safe environment is a fruitful ground for innovation. Collaboration within research and education can foster innovation activities by exposing students and researchers as well as professional services to good practices in the field of innovation. This could for example cover joint development of new approaches to entrepreneurship and management training, as well as offering work placements with local companies. The networks could also foster engagement with other societal actors, contributing to the social cohesion of their regions.



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