

Which way forward for the European University alliances?

The European Universities initiative has attracted more excitement in the higher education sector than any other action in the Erasmus+ programme. It is the first initiative to potentially offer long-term support for enhancing the quality and competitiveness of universities through experimentation, collaboration and reflection on institutional practices. More than 280 higher education institutions across Europe now enjoy the benefits of being part of a European University alliance. As the alliances have become increasingly visible and enthusiasm for them has grown, so have the policy objectives behind the initiative. Currently, the alliances are seen as 'test beds' for how Europe's universities should look in 2030 – an agenda which is yet to be fleshed out and supported by universities. While recognizing the transformative potential of the initiative, The Guild member universities emphasize that collaboration needs to grow bottom-up, based on the alliances' distinctive strategies. At the same time, they acknowledge that innovation and originality can flourish only by developing new practices in universities and overcoming national obstacles.

Last week the Education Ministers adopted the [Council Conclusions](#) on the European Universities initiative, suggesting greater interoperability and cooperation between Member States regarding European research, teaching, and staff career development practices, including joint recruitment schemes for teachers and researchers. They offered support for the use of micro-credentials in higher education and called for removing obstacles to cooperation at the EU level, notably when it comes to joint degrees.

The European Commission is currently consulting alliances and stakeholders on the design of the next calls to European Universities. To ensure the genuine success of the initiative, The Guild wishes to contribute the following recommendations:

1. Maximize the bottom-up nature of the initiative and enhance the autonomy of universities

Collaborations on which the European Universities are founded will take time to develop, and their added value will increase over time. The freedom to design and prioritize the content of collaboration has been a strong pull factor for universities and must not be compromised in the next phase of the initiative. Alliances should be supported in their strategic objectives and level of ambition. They should not be overwhelmed or steered into adopting additional objectives which might jeopardize the alliances' mission. Instead, universities should be given time and space to develop a variety of cooperation models, and in doing so, avoid institutional mimicry.

2. Adopt ambitious but realistic objectives

The Guild welcomes plans to connect the alliances' activities with the broader policy discussions around the European higher education transformation. However, we should be realistic and prioritize areas where the EU can provide added value. Also, it might be more feasible to address certain transformation needs at the institutional level first rather than in the context of an alliance.

We welcome the Commission's willingness to facilitate greater interoperability between the different national systems by promoting available EU mechanisms and exploring initiatives such as the European Degree. These might encourage reflections amongst alliances about what they can achieve together and what should remain the remit of individual universities. We should however be mindful that new regulatory initiatives should demonstrate clear added value. The pandemic has accelerated the need for new ways of working, but that does not necessarily mean putting new systems in place at the EU level, especially during the piloting stage.

3. Ensure sustainable and competitive funding for alliances

For the alliances to deliver on their objectives, we should move beyond project-based collaboration to sustainable long-term partnerships based on communities of practice. The Guild is ready to contribute to the discussion on a possible programmatic funding approach which would better reflect alliances' needs. Offering a more long-term and ambitious EU funding perspective for the alliances is welcome, although these efforts should be complemented by national investments as well. As long as national support varies between Member States, we risk proper ownership of the initiative in the long run. Financial support will be needed even more in the upcoming implementation phase of various activities developed by the alliances. Equally importantly, Member States should demonstrate their support by better accommodating alliances' innovative practices in national regulations.

While working towards a more programmatic approach, we support the proposal to provide further Erasmus+ funding to existing alliances (4 + 2 years) based on a positive evaluation. They should be assessed against the initial goals defined by each alliance and evidence of real advancement of their pilot projects. This is necessary to ensure the quality and excellence of the initiative. At the same time, we should avoid earmarking funds or favouring alliances when applying for excellence-based research funding.

4. Allow alliances to be open to new partners (in Europe and globally)

The Guild welcomes proposals to keep the initiative open to new alliances (and new members). Alliances that seek to extend their activities should be supported in this endeavour by an appropriate increase in funding. It is important to note that for the success of the initiative, we should continue to support the bottom-up nature of alliances, which includes the size of the alliance and the choice of partners. Therefore, we call upon the Commission and Member States to support those alliances who wish to grow by providing funding based on the number of partners.

Joint educational offerings or research projects take time to develop and require close and trusted academic communities: this is particularly the case with UK and Swiss partners where cooperation has been built over the years. Although the UK has decided not to associate to the new Erasmus+ programme, and Swiss negotiations are still ongoing, their contribution is vital to the European Universities initiative.

Finally, the alliances can play an important role in strengthening Europe's universities globally. International partnerships need time to develop, and partners need to see the value of being part of an ambitious initiative. For that reason, universities should be able to choose partners which can bring added value to the alliance and contribute to their outreach.