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The Ambition Behind European Universities Networks

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The European Union (EU) has an ambitious plan to create transnational “European Universities” out of networks of European higher education institutions.

The [initiative](#) is not a new idea, but has been given fresh and significant impetus in the past year due to fears that UK withdrawal – or “Brexit” – and rising populism on the continent would undermine the future of the EU.

French President Macron, speaking at the Sorbonne University in Paris in September 2017 called for the creation by 2024 of 20 “European Universities.”

Four months later, at the December 2017 Gothenburg Summit, European leaders backed the idea and called for the 20 European Universities to consist of networks of universities across the European Union that would “enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of universities.”

Thus the European Universities Network Initiative (EUNI) was born. For 2019, €30 million was set aside to fund six experimental models to test the concept and its transformative potential with a second pilot to be launched in 2020 and the full scheme in 2021.

Work began on mapping existing university partnerships and a call was issued on 24 October 2018 for candidates to join the first pilot within the framework of the Erasmus+ student and academic exchange programme. That call closes in February 2019.



Macron had proposed a “network of universities across Europe with programmes that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages.”

He said: “These European Universities will also be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence.”

It was fortunate that his widely reported intervention came just a few months before the EU leaders’ meeting at which, unusually and fortuitously, education and culture had been put on the agenda.

It also coincided with the European Commission (EC)’s proposal to create a European Education Area by 2025, which would include mutual recognition of school and university diplomas and a general network of European universities. The EC sees the [European Universities Network](#) as one of the flagships for powering this forward.

In February 2018, EU education ministers asked the Commission to involve member states and stakeholders in a discussion of the concept of European Universities and said the initiative should include quality, excellence and inclusiveness and link education, research and innovation.

According to a European Commission senior official close to the European Universities Initiative, the two objectives of the EUNI are “to make European universities more competitive internationally, compared with the best of the US and Asia for instance, but also to strengthen the sense of a common European values and a common European identity.”

The European Commission’s Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sports and Culture (DG EAC) said the pilot would test different cooperation models based on four principles:

- They would be an alliance of chosen partners from all types of higher education institutions covering a “broad European geographic scope.”
- They would have a jointly created long-term strategy focused on “sustainability, excellence and European values.”
- They would offer student-centred curricula jointly delivered across an “inter-university campus” at all study levels.
- They would also take a “challenge-based approach” in which students, academics and external partners can “cooperate in cross-disciplinary teams to tackle the biggest issues facing Europe today.”

The pilot is pitched at alliances of ideally five to eight higher education institutions, particularly those with a strong history of cooperating with each other.

The call for candidates proved very popular, with one information day meeting in Brussels packing out a room of 300 people while 1,000 more followed it online. As a result, it is expected that the budget will be increased to cater to more than the six alliances or partnerships originally envisaged.

The mapping of existing university partnerships, involved transnational partnerships of various sizes and types of higher education institutions that were funded through Erasmus Mundus Joint Degrees, Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships and Knowledge Alliances, and Horizon 2020 Teaming and Twinning.

The findings gave some pointers on where the new concept of European universities could add value compared with existing partnerships.

Two-thirds of existing partnerships did not offer any mobility scheme at undergraduate level, for instance. Only 41 percent of respondents said the partnership involved the entire organisation – as opposed to occurring only at department or faculty level. And only 38 percent of partnerships covered the three missions: education, research and innovation.

In addition, half of respondents felt existing funding tools were not suitable for deepening and extending transnational co-operation between universities.

A key shortcoming is that existing partnerships mostly take a short-term approach of working together on a particular project for three to five years and then disband, the EC official said.

“We would like them to develop jointly long-term strategies for the next 20-30 years that go much further in time and commitment and in terms of doing things together,” he said. “We want universities to come up with the ideas themselves.”

This is a programme full of ambition for a deep level of integration that envisages, for instance, that in a partnership on European studies a student could go to Paris to study law, to Rome for economics, and Athens for history as part of the same degree programme, attending either in person or virtually, with a guarantee that the qualification would be systematically recognised across borders.

It could also mean universities going one step further and cooperating on designing the curriculum together and ensuring, for example, that they have complimentary facilities for research, rather than identical ones.

“It’s up to universities to come up with the ideas,” the official said. “But we want there to be much more freedom for students to pick what they want from universities and for there to be systematic mobility between the institutions in the alliances.”

Quality assurance is a key challenge, but the ambition is very much in line with the Commission’s vision, [published](#) last May, for a European Higher Education Area to be created by 2025 in which faculty mobility and recognition of diplomas transnationally in EU member states are key.

The tools for this already exist under the Bologna process but are not being implemented systematically and the EC wants European Universities to be front-runners in pushing this forward.

“You cannot be a European University if, among your partners, you do not have this systematic recognition [of qualifications],” the official says. “These universities will be the locomotives, the inspiration more broadly in the EHEA and hopefully beyond.”



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