



EUROPE

European Universities Initiative – Chances and challenges

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The **European Universities Initiative** is undoubtedly the most discussed political project in higher education and research at the European Union level in recent years.

Whether it will achieve the desired positive systemic impact depends on a number of critical issues: the ability to unite rather than divide Europe's higher education and research landscape, sufficient and sustainable funding, overcoming legal and administrative barriers around cross-border collaboration and developing the research dimension of the initiative.

When French President Emmanuel Macron first aired the idea of European universities seamlessly working across borders in his speech at the Sorbonne University in September 2017, there was a sense for many who had been working in the field for years that it was rather like old wine being poured into new bottles.

Similar visions had been promoted at different periods in the past, for instance, the European University Institute in Florence, the College of Europe in Bruges and its Natolin campus in Poland and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT).

How could this new initiative be different? What should it do? And why does it seem to have struck a chord with both European policy-makers and universities?

For the EU the initiative provides a welcome opportunity to revive the social dimension of European integration and focus on education as an area of collaboration with a positive notion of fostering mutual understanding, something that is important, particularly in times when the value of multilateral collaboration is being called into question.

For Europe's universities, this is a chance to build on the strength of their diversity and connect excellence in different domains across the continent, thus creating critical mass, increasing visibility and further developing capacity in learning and teaching, research and innovation.

An opportunity for systemic reform

From the European University Association (EUA) **Trends 2018 survey** we know that

cross-border collaboration and the mobility of students and staff are important for the development of learning and teaching.

Likewise, the **EUA's work on efficiency** shows how collaborations, shared services and pooling of resources can help to increase capacity and create synergies.

Existing examples, such as Eucor – the European Campus – or the University of the Greater Region, to mention just two, show that cross-border collaboration on an institutional scale can work where there is long-term commitment at all levels and institutions have the autonomy to develop common strategies.

New alliances of institutions with similar profiles (such as EuroTech Universities, YERUN and others) appeared years before the European Universities Initiative was born. All this points to an increased interest among European institutions in engaging more closely across borders.

Furthermore, the initiative is an opportunity to push forward reforms both at systemic and institutional levels and give new attention to some of the legal and administrative issues still hampering cross-border collaboration, be they recognition of diplomas and study periods abroad or accreditation of joint programmes – things that have been on the radar of the Bologna Process for years but may now be given a new sense of urgency.

The key challenge is to focus on the positive systemic impact of the initiative and ensure that the benefits can be spread beyond those institutions directly involved.

Dissemination of good practice, as well as a close connection with existing policy processes, such as the European Higher Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Education Area, will be crucial for this.

This also poses the question of the geographical boundaries of the initiative, which are currently limited to Erasmus+ programme countries, excluding, for example, Switzerland. Ensuring representation of institutions from all parts of Europe is another key question.

Beware the Matthew Effect

Regarding funding, it seems clear that resources made available currently under the Erasmus+ programme are not sufficient and are not intended to cover the costs of developing such deep alliances.

It will be important for the EU, as well as individual countries, to find a balance between supporting such alliances and funding smaller scale collaboration projects that are in high demand under the current Erasmus+ programme.

If too much funding was to be concentrated on a few alliances, this could hit resources in the higher education and research system as a whole. A 'Matthew Effect' of giving more to those who already have more should be avoided as it will not help to close the innovation gap

within Europe.

An important question in this regard is how many of these deep alliances and networks will there be at the end of the initiative and what is sustainable for the system as a whole. President Macron and the European Council referred to creating at least 20 networks by 2024, but it is already apparent that there will be almost double that number after the first two pilot calls – and before the next EU programme generation starts in 2021.

Focus on teaching

The **results of the first pilot call** show that higher education institutions across Europe are motivated to participate and have many innovative ideas and approaches. The focus currently is very much on teaching, with Erasmus+ being the anchor programme.

As the explicit goal of the initiative is also to strengthen links between teaching and research, and this alone represents much of the uniqueness of the initiative for universities, this dimension will need to be developed in the future.

How to do this will be a challenge. It will require building synergies between different EU funding programmes, such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the European Structural and Investment Funds and others without making it more complex for universities to access funding.

The European Universities Initiative is a great opportunity to deepen collaboration and revive the debate about much needed system-level reforms, but it is important that universities and policy-makers are aware of the risks and avoid creating a two-tier system with resources concentrated on a few big players, leaving other institutions to struggle even more.

Close collaboration can help to bring about important innovation. The crux is how to maximise this potential to the mutual benefit of the university sector and Europe.

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