

CESAER

EVALUATION OF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES PILOT

POSITION DATED 20TH APRIL 2020

The leading universities of Science and Technology (S&T) united within [CESAER](#) welcome the [European Universities initiative](#) as a promising impetus to boost the quality and competitiveness of higher education institutions in Europe and beyond. With this position, we present our reflections on the pilot and our recommendations for the further development of this initiative under the next Erasmus and Horizon Europe programmes from 2021 to 2027.

In our view, European University alliances will only be successful if they are (i) enabled to release transformative forces; (ii) based on scientific excellence and strong cooperation (existing and new); (iii) provided with sustainable funding; and (iv) facilitated to be inclusive and open.

ENABLE UNIVERSITIES TO RELEASE TRANSFORMATIVE FORCES

We fully support that European University alliances are to serve as role models to promote [key values](#) such as safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy and to teach democratic citizenship. However, we feel that the first calls were primarily based on the ideas of the European Commission on how universities should transform rather than the real challenges and needs of the universities themselves. In our view, the biggest mistake in developing the European Universities initiative would be to force one-size-fits-all top-down models of cooperation and governance upon the diverse alliances.

- ⇒ We advise to better use the challenges and needs of universities as the starting point when helping the alliances achieve structural, systemic and sustainable impact, while refraining from top-down approaches.
- ⇒ The objective must be to enable universities to act as autonomous agents of great change and to release unprecedented transformative forces to contribute to ecological, societal and economic sustainability of Europe and beyond.
- ⇒ We urge the European institutions to allow for a diversity of governance and cooperation models, enabling universities and their alliances to draw up, implement and continuously refine their institutional development plans.

BASE ALLIANCES ON SCIENTIFIC EXCELLENCE AND STRONG COOPERATION

Inclusion of all types of higher education institutions in the alliances is a welcome aspiration. However, excellent research-intensive universities should be at the heart of this initiative as they effectively bridge research, education, innovation and service to society. We stress the particular contribution of leading universities of S&T to tackling the grand global challenges by meeting the needed demand of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

- ⇒ We urge the European institutions to ensure a focus on scientific excellence and research-based education and training, and strong cooperation (new and existing) in the future calls for European University alliances.
- ⇒ At the EU-level, we welcome the introduction of an additional funding instrument under Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe to support the research and innovation dimension of the alliances. We call for more financial incentives for the alliance to engage in challenge- and research-based education and training.

PROVIDE SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

The expectations on the alliances are high, but the current funding from Erasmus covers only a fraction of the total costs. The ambitious goals of the initiative thus must be matched by equally ambitious funding, allowing the alliances to realise their long-term strategies. About half of the EU member states provide, or plan to provide, supplementary funding to higher education institutions in their country which are involved in the initiative. Although such top-up funding is welcome and needed, it creates an uneven playing field amongst partners from different countries and amongst alliances.

- ⇒ We urge regional, national and EU institutions to assure continuous financial support to the alliances beyond the initial three-year period and to increase the budget for each alliance significantly.
- ⇒ Transparent financial planning should demonstrate that this initiative is not a short-term one-time investment, but a long-term commitment and a guarantee for continuity and stability.
- ⇒ We urge all authorities involved to develop uniform local, regional and national co-funding schemes establishing a level-playing field within and amongst successful alliances.
- ⇒ In the light of the limited means available, we advise to preferably select a limited number of excellent research-based European University alliances instead of a large number of poorly funded alliances.

FACILITATE OPENNESS AND INCLUSIVENESS

The exclusion of institutions from non-EU countries testifies an inadequate inward-looking perspective and is divisive in many existing cooperation networks, especially as no valid justification is given. Excellent research-based higher education thrives on collaboration with like-minded partners outside of the EU, as would European University alliances. Moreover, the set target of at least 50% student mobility within the alliances limits the capacity for outside cooperation and thus threatens to turn the alliances into closed EU-clubs.

- ⇒ We urge for increased autonomy for the alliances to make activities and mobility schemes for students, researchers and staff accessible for any like-minded partners to ensure that the alliances can thrive on the global stage by being open, outward looking and directed towards a genuine contribution to tackling global challenges.
- ⇒ We urge the EU to allow the alliances to be inclusive and open to partners from partner countries (i.e. third countries). Student mobility between the alliances and partners from partner countries should be included into the 50% target.
- ⇒ Partnerships with universities from partner countries must be fully acknowledged.

The leading research-intensive universities of S&T united within CESAER are committed and ready to contribute to the further development of this initiative. We offer ourselves to engage with authorities and stakeholders to explore and advance topics such as micro-credentials, lifelong learning, the improvement of quality assurance and accreditation systems, a European statute for universities and corresponding diploma, legal status of the alliances, and direct non-competitive EU funding.

All future efforts should be targeted to (i) anchor democratic citizenship, increasing institutional autonomy and boosting scientific excellence, (ii) strengthen (existing) transnational cooperation, (iii) reduce bureaucracy and administrative burden, (iv) remove regulatory and legal barriers, and (v) harmonise standards, so that the European University alliances can release their full potential.

For more information, please contact our Advisor for Higher Education [Indrė Antanavičiūtė](#).

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