

Advancing the flagship initiatives of the European Strategy for Universities

Position dated 28 March 2022

The leading universities of Science and Technology (S&T) united within [CESAER](#) welcome the publication of the European Commission's [higher education package](#) including the [Commission Communication on a European strategy for universities](#) and a [Commission Proposal for a Council recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation](#). We also compliment the European Commission's [Directorate-General for Education, Sport, Youth and Culture](#) and [Directorate-General for Research and Innovation](#) for working closely together on this package.

Recalling our previous related positions 'Go beyond resilience to tackle local and global challenges' ([March 2021](#)), 'Towards a dynamic European Education Area driven by excellence' ([October 2020](#)), 'Towards a truly reinforced European Research Area (ERA)' ([October 2020](#)), 'Lead for research, education and innovation in recovery and to build resilience' ([June 2020](#)), 'Sustainable Funding for Universities of the Future in Europe' ([March 2020](#)) and 'Boost for research talent circulation within ERA needed' ([February 2020](#)), we welcome the strong emphasis on (i) the unique role of universities at the centre of education, research and innovation, (ii) the acknowledgement of their "essential role to play in Europe's post-pandemic recovery and in shaping sustainable and resilient societies and economies", and (iii) that they are "a condition and foundation for open, democratic, fair and sustainable societies".

All of this is true for universities in general, while universities of science and technology (S&T) have a specific role to play due to the tremendous transformative power of S&T. Emerging [key technologies](#) will continue to have a profound impact on our societies in the future, and universities of S&T have a key role to play in shaping these developments. We therefore reconfirm our commitment to advancing the role of S&T to help tackle local and global challenges for the benefit of humanity and our planet.

We welcome that the higher education package adopts a more synergetic approach between education and research, and offer our full support in the hard work ahead to ensure that the research dimension develops cohesively throughout the package's rollout to help achieve the objectives of both the European Education Area (EEA) and the ERA.

In this context, the [European strategy for universities](#) introduces four 'flagship initiatives' which we address below. In addition, a vital cross-cutting issue is ensuring that the governance and monitoring of the implementation is fit for purpose.

Governance must have a direct, inclusive, structured and sustained involvement of stakeholders

We appreciate being involved in co-creating strategies which have a direct effect on our [Members](#). It is vital that stakeholder organisations are involved in governance and monitoring in a direct, inclusive, structured and sustained manner. We should draw lessons from the ERA governance, and ensure that stakeholder involvement is transparent, direct, inclusive, structured and sustained throughout so that the stakeholder community can assume responsibility for the strategy's success.

Concerning governance of the European University initiative, we see a distinction between (i) the European University alliances promoting concrete cooperation in research, education and innovation, and (ii) stakeholder organisations being the independent voice of their members. Acknowledging the inseparable nature of research and education for universities, as laid down in the [Magna Charta Universitatum](#), the governance structure must also be linked to - and in clear synergy with - ongoing efforts in the ERA.

Flagship (i): European Universities initiative

We welcome the proposed increase in ambition and funding for the European Universities alliances and the commitment to creating new knowledge across countries and disciplines.

Whilst the Commission states that “[t]he aim is to develop and share a common long-term structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research and innovation”, there remains scant detail on how this will be achieved. We are convinced that the initiative can only be successful if alliances are underpinned by a programme-based, rather than project-based approach, safeguarding the long-term sustainability of the alliances by ensuring balance between competitive and non-competitive funding on EU, national and regional levels. Furthermore, a programme-based approach should go far beyond guaranteeing sustainable funding for alliances. The burden on alliances to continuously undergo the management, administration, evaluation and assessment processes associated with the existing project-based approach would be significantly reduced, allowing alliances to focus more on what they do best.

Furthermore, we call for an appropriate balance in the initiative's selection and implementation processes between (i) bottom-up, investigator-led frontier research and (ii) research contributing to EU-level policy priorities supported through top-down funding programmes relating to societal challenges.

Fair and realistic rules and conditions are needed to evaluate the success of alliances. There should be a transparent process on how the success of the alliances is measured.

The emphasis on mobility and transnational experience is welcome, and we underline its important connection to promoting brain and [talent circulation](#). We therefore call upon the EU institutions to pursue more concrete legal measures to be taken at the regional, national and European levels to remove obstacles in areas such as social security, pension rights, regulations relating to student and intern status, and migration rules. Without being underpinned by such key components, a legal statute for alliances of higher education will fail to attract the talent it desires.

Flagship (ii): Legal statute for alliances of higher education institutions

We welcome the Commission's proposal to work towards such a legal statute in cooperation with stakeholders and member states, and emphasise that this should be used as an opportunity to remove barriers at the regional, national and European levels to the free circulation of scientific knowledge and its bearers (i.e. learners, teachers, researchers, leaders and administrators), while safeguarding institutional autonomy and that [scientific knowledge is protected to ensure a Europe fit for the digital age](#).

Pooling resources, capacities and strengths would be even more beneficial by involving like-minded third countries in (and beyond) the vicinity of the EU, given that many leading European higher education institutions are located outside of the EU. We therefore call for a multilateral approach to such a statute.

As education is a national and in some cases regional competence, we call for the statute to be developed in such a way that national legislation and related reforms can support European ambitions.

Such a legal statute may also be useful in the context of sectoral or thematic partnerships wishing to award diplomas, and potentially also to broader cooperation with non-academic partners. This should be a consideration throughout the statute's development.

Flagship (iii): Joint European degree

Whilst we welcome the Commission's commitment to valuing transnational experiences in higher education, we call for such a degree framework to be developed with a multilateral approach reflecting Europe's leading role in research, education and innovation by involving as many excellent and like-minded third countries in (and beyond) the vicinity of the EU as possible. We recall the [European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process](#) as the solid foundation on which existing comparability in the standards and quality assurance of higher education qualifications is built. We call for the joint European degrees to be developed in that context. While developing the envisioned approach, a range of additional considerations are needed:

- There must be clear [added value](#) with regard to existing Bologna instruments and existing joint degrees, as they currently are on offer in Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM) programmes and others.
- The initiative should take a [lean approach](#) with minimal additional administrative burden placed on the involved institutions.
- To avoid confusion, there must be clarity over [alignment or differentiation of a European Joint Degree](#) with degrees under (i) EMJM and (ii) the Knowledge & Innovation Communities of the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT).
- There must be [continuity](#) to integrate existing approaches, including building on the [European Approach for Quality Assurance](#).
- There should be [flexibility](#) for European (joint) degrees to be awarded in the name of the entire alliance, where appropriate, or to cover part of the alliance when the specific individual study program or an individual student's curriculum only encompasses part of the alliance. This is particularly relevant for degrees leading to a regulated profession.

Flagship (iv): European Student Card initiative

Recalling our [previous position](#) 'Vision for the EEA', we welcome the further implementation of a European Student Card to allow for automatic recognition of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits and call for an open and wide EEA that is not confined within the borders of the EU, but covers all signatory countries of the [European Cultural Convention](#) of the Council of Europe and provides for partnerships with like-minded third countries.

Our offer

Recalling the strong commitments and long-standing efforts of our [Members](#) and association in advancing the European and global dimensions and contributions of research, education and innovation, we offer our expertise and cooperation as a key stakeholder for research-based science and technology education and training at European level for the upcoming debates, actions and other endeavours.

For more information please contact our Senior Advisor for Learning & Teaching [Lloyd Anthony Huitson](#).

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