



Paris, 24 October 2024

**POLITICAL OPINION
ON THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE**

The European affairs committee of the French Senate,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, in particular Articles 6 and 165,

Having regard to the Council conclusions of 10 June 2021 on the European Universities initiative – “Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education” 2021/C 221/03,

Having regard to the European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017;

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 18 January 2022 on a European strategy for universities, COM(2022) 16 final,

Having regard to the Council recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, 2022/C 160/01,

Having regard to the Council conclusions of 24 April 2022 on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe, 2022/C 167/03,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 27 March 2024 on a blueprint for a European degree, COM(2024)144 final,

Having regard to the proposal for a Council recommendation of 27 March 2024 on attractive and sustainable careers in Higher Education, COM(2024) 145 final,

Having regard to the proposal for a Council recommendation of 27 March 2024 on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education, COM (2024)147 final,

Having regard to the Rome Communiqué of 19 November 2020 and the Tirana Communiqué of 30 May 2024, adopted at the European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference;

Considering the success of the “European Universities” initiative, with the five Calls for Proposals issued by the European Commission resulting in the **creation of 64 European university alliances**, exceeding the target of 60 alliances by mid-2024;

Whereas **this initiative covers a wide range of institutions and countries**, since 574 institutions representing 35 countries are involved in these 64 European universities;

Whereas **French institutions have taken an active part** in this initiative, with 64 of them represented in 55 European universities, and have been supported by essential additional national funding;

Whereas the **diversity of alliance models observed depends on the integration strategy of the institutions**, and in particular reflects the wide variety of their scopes of action, their disciplinary fields, their governance and their systems for awarding degrees;

Whereas this diversity is consistent with the European Commission’s wish to give institutions autonomy and **is one of the strengths and successful elements of the initiative**;

Considering the **first results of the European Commission's pilot projects** on the question of a European degree and the status of the alliances;

Whereas **this initiative has had a "transformative" effect** for the institutions concerned, particularly French ones, insofar as it offers new opportunities for the entire university community (students, academic and administrative staff), broadens and diversifies the courses offered, enhances the international attractiveness of participating institutions, and contributes to promoting European values and identity;

Whereas, in addition, **funding to develop alliances is uncertain**, which poses a challenge for their economic model;

Whereas **insufficient consideration is given to the institutions' research component**, which is therefore the "poor relation" in this initiative;

Whereas **the governance model of the institutions is fragile** and the absence of structure or suitable status could hinder their development;

Considering **the complexity of implementing joint programmes and degrees** – not resolved by the Bologna Process – due to varying use of the tools of this Process, and also to existing national variations in education or internal prescriptive obstacles in each Member State, especially France;

Whereas there is **insufficient acknowledgement of the commitment of university staff in the European alliances initiative**, and more generally in transnational cooperation programmes;

Whereas there are **other obstacles to the development of alliances**, such as the different levels of involvement of alliance partners, the difficulty sometimes experienced in mobilising the university community, including students who are sometimes unaware of the scheme, the non-adaptation of some computer equipment or the poor level of English, particularly in French staff and students;

Whereas **the ambitious goals set by the European Commission seem difficult to achieve** in the short term,

particularly in view of the difficulties identified – some of which, concerning joint programmes, have existed for some time;

Considers it necessary **to view the “European universities” initiative in the long term**, eventually including all institutions wishing to join and maintaining flexibility in setting up alliances;

Welcomes the three texts presented by the European Commission on 27 March 2024¹ – and especially the communication on the common European degree – which will help in the development of alliances, subject to certain clarifications;

Calls for a shift from a **“project” approach to a more structured, long-term approach** through sustainable funding, simplified cooperation, facilitation of governance and promotion of joint programmes, acknowledgement of staff commitment and digital tools;

On the obstacles to be overcome to ensure the development of alliances

Requests **that the alliances’ financial model be made sustainable and simplified**, in particular by extending the duration of funding, aligning it with that of the multiannual financial framework, and through a multiannual contract between the alliances, Member States and the European Union;

Emphasises that the initiative **should take better account of the research component in higher education institutions** by linking alliance training strategies to a coherent research and innovation strategy, and by providing institutions with better access to funding;

Advocates the establishment of **a mode of governance and/or a legal status for the development of alliances**, which is

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 27 March 2024 on a blueprint for a European degree, COM(2024)144 final, Proposal for a Council recommendation of 27 March 2024 on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, COM(2024) 145 final, Proposal for a Council recommendation of 27 March 2024 for a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education, COM(2024)147 final.

adapted to the objectives and the specific requirements of each one and which guarantees student representation on their governing bodies;

Recommends **better recognition of the commitment made by university staff** in transnational cooperation activities, and especially in European university alliances, for example, through specific allocations to institutions or bonus policies;

Calls for **the establishment of joint programmes and degrees** to be encouraged, within the framework of the Bologna Process, on the one hand via the increased use of the European quality assurance approach and a reform of the guidelines (ESG - *European Standards and Guidelines*) so that they include a research and employability dimension, and on the other hand, via a simplification of national regulations, on the basis of cooperation between Member States, while ensuring compliance with certain national requirements;

Suggests **changes to the French rules, following the model of countries such as Spain**, to facilitate the introduction of joint degrees, for example by the automatic accreditation of joint degrees assessed according to the European quality assurance approach or by exemptions in order to circumvent identified obstacles (ECTS credits, single certificate, registration fees, etc.), while ensuring compliance with specific national requirements and the principle of subsidiarity;

On the establishment of a European degree, a necessary tool to remove obstacles linked to joint degrees

Considers that the European Commission's proposal to establish a European label or degree is **a necessary tool to encourage the establishment of joint degrees**;

Is in favour of **the gradual approach proposed by the European Commission**, consisting of first going through an intermediate phase covered by the awarding of a label, leading to a European joint degree;

Also welcomes **the Commission's proposal to base this European label/degree on common European criteria** (without adding national criteria) and **a simplified accreditation procedure**, and advocates that **these criteria be supplemented** in order to

guarantee the quality level of future European degrees, notably by the two criteria used in the accreditation process in France, namely research support and professional integration;

Supports **the Commission's proposal to entrust the assessment of joint programmes to an accredited national agency**, which would lead to the automatic recognition of the European label or degree within the framework of the alliances, drawing on existing tools in the Bologna Process and on assessment by existing national agencies, and proposes **a harmonised rule for designating the agency in charge of the quality assurance procedure** at the European level, which could be the institution coordinating the alliance or the *Erasmus Mundus* project;

Believes that **coordinated action by the Member States is essential in order to move towards a label and above all towards a European degree**, at the risk of seeing national divergences persist, as these constitute so many obstacles to the development of joint degrees;

Considers it necessary, however, with regard to establishing this European label or degree, to **ensure compliance with the principle of subsidiarity and the specific characteristics of Member States** and to **take the time necessary to assess the impact of such measures** on the national legal framework, taking into account any concerns of students and higher education institutions;

Emphasises in particular **the importance of ensuring that the criteria for this future European label or degree are sufficiently flexible** to adapt to different national contexts, and guarantee an adequate level of quality for degrees;

Considers that this future European degree **should under no circumstances replace national degrees**, and should be integrated into the existing national structure, as provided for in the current European Commission proposal;

Suggests **encouraging the establishment of such a degree** for example *via* increased commitment on the part of socio-economic partners and targeted communication with students;

On the desirability of rolling out the alliances

Considers it necessary to **encourage other forms of cooperation than joint programmes**, with alliances as an ideal framework for implementing alternative approaches to European university training and cooperation, such as the internationalisation of national programmes, the practice of micro-certification, or the development of virtual or hybrid mobility;

Supports a **widespread introduction of the European alliances system**, offering all institutions the opportunity to join an alliance if they so wish;

Also urges **the use of other tools of European cooperation in higher education**, notably:

- by not earmarking European label and degree projects for alliance member institutions;

- by encouraging other means of collaboration between higher education institutions, such as bilateral cooperation or existing cross-border alliances;