

...assessment and future prospects for the initiative on

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES: TOWARDS ACT II



The “European Universities” initiative – following on from the French President’s speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017 – was officially launched by the European Commission in 2018, via a first Call for Proposals.

Since then, four additional Calls for Proposals have been issued, providing funding for a total of **64 alliances between European higher education institutions**, exceeding the European

Commission’s target of 60 alliances by mid-2024.

In order to consolidate these alliances, the European Commission published three texts on 27 March 2024 with the aim of removing certain obstacles encountered by the institutions: a communication on a blueprint for a European degree,¹ and two proposals for recommendations, one on quality assurance² and the other on academic careers.³

Six years after the launch of this initiative, and with these recent texts in mind, the Senate European Affairs Committee tasked Rapporteurs Ronan Le Gleut and Karine Daniel with conducting an initial assessment of the scheme. After some twenty hearings, a trip to Brussels and feedback from almost 50 French higher education institutions, who were interviewed and/or contacted *via* written questionnaires, the Rapporteurs produced their assessment with the following recommendations.

A. EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES, A “REVOLUTION” IN PROGRESS?

Described by some as a “second revolution” after the Erasmus programme, the European Universities Initiative is undeniably a vector of transformation for both French and European higher education. More than 500 institutions representing 35 countries are involved in these 64 European universities.

The initial assessment of this scheme is very positive overall – based mainly on feedback from French higher education institutions, but also from other European stakeholders interviewed by the Rapporteurs. The “transformative” virtue of these alliances seems undeniable (see box below), and the institutions are clearly enthusiastic about this initiative, whether they are members of an alliance or not. This first report is encouraging, but additional assessments will certainly have to be carried out, as some alliances have only recently come into being.

¹ Communication from the European Commission on a blueprint for a European degree (COM (2024) 144 final).

² Proposal for a Council recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education (COM (2024) 147 final).

³ Proposal for a Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in Higher Education (COM (2024) 145 final).

The Rapporteurs welcome the active role played by French institutions in this initiative: 64 of them are represented in 55 European universities, and under this scheme they will benefit from essential additional national funding of around €100 million.

A “transformative” effect for the institutions, members of alliances

1. These alliances represent a unique tool for the internationalisation and Europeanisation of institutions, resulting in:

- a change of scale leading to a pooling of resources and an exchange of beneficial best practices;

- internationalisation involving the entire university community: students, academic and administrative staff.

2. Undeniable educational effects for students: growth and diversification in courses offered and in mobility.

3. New opportunities for scientific cooperation despite the shortcomings of the research component of the alliances initiative.

4. An improvement in international recognition and the attractiveness of institutions that are members of alliances.

5. Development of a territorial ecosystem on a local or European scale.

6. Promotion of European values and identity.

B....BUT OBSTACLES AND RISKS PERSIST

1/ Uncertain funding which poses a challenge for the economic model of the alliances and their sustainability, a restrictive “silo” organisation, and underfunding of the research component.

2/ Fragile governance: lack of structure or appropriate legal status.

3/ Complex implementation of joint programmes and degrees, not resolved by the Bologna Process. Case in point: difficulties encountered by the Universities of Montpellier and La Rochelle in creating joint degrees within their alliance.

4/ Further obstacles: insufficient acknowledgement of the commitment of university staff, different involvement of alliance partners, mobilisation of the university community is sometimes difficult, non-adaptation of some computer facilities and inadequate English skills.

5/ Objectives unattainable within the given time frame.

C. INSTITUTIONALISING EUROPEAN ALLIANCES IN THE LONG TERM WITH ALL INTERESTED INSTITUTIONS INCLUDED EVENTUALLY

1. Consolidate and simplify the alliances' financial model

The challenge in the years to come is to consolidate the **alliances' economic model, to ensure their sustainability in the long term and put an end to the fragmentation of funding**. In particular, this consolidation could consist in extending the duration of funding, aligning it with the EU's multiannual financial framework, and/or a multiannual contract between alliances, Member States and the European Union.

2. Give better consideration to the research component: the European Universities initiative needs its two feet

Strengthening this aspect is essential if higher education institutions **are to play their part fully in developing the European Research Area**. The result should be the **necessary decompartmentalisation of research and training missions, and better access to funding** for institutions.

3. Review governance and status: the need for a more suitable structure, as well as a flexible regulatory framework

While the Rapporteurs call for the establishment of **a mode of governance and/or a legal status in order for alliances to develop**, they emphasise the need to select a **regulatory framework adapted to the objectives and specific needs of each**, and to systematically guarantee student representation on their governing bodies.

4. Encourage the introduction of joint programmes and degrees (within the framework of the Bologna Process)

In the opinion of the Rapporteurs, the **introduction of joint programmes and degrees should be encouraged** within the Bologna Process framework, firstly via **increased use of the European approach to quality assurance and a reform of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)** to include a research and employability dimension, and secondly via a **simplification of national regulations**, based on cooperation between Member States, ensuring compliance with any specific national requirements.

5. Focus on the European label/degree, a necessary tool to encourage the introduction of joint degrees

The Rapporteurs support the gradual approach proposed by the European Commission in its communication on the common European degree (COM(2024) 144 final) consisting of first going through an intermediate phase covered by the awarding of a label, then leading to a joint European degree. However, while this label is a useful first step, the final objective must remain that of a European degree, the only tool capable of putting an end to or at least greatly limiting existing obstacles to the creation of joint degrees.

They also welcome the Commission's proposal to base this European label/degree on common European criteria (without adding national criteria) and a simplified accreditation procedure. They nevertheless call for these criteria to be supplemented in order to guarantee the quality level of future European degrees, notably by the two criteria used in the framework of the accreditation process in France, namely research support and professional integration.

The Rapporteurs also support the Commission's proposal for a recommendation on quality assurance (COM(2024) 147 final) by which the assessment of joint programmes will be entrusted to an accredited national agency, which would lead to automatic recognition of the European label or degree in the framework of the alliances. This recognition would facilitate the implementation of European degrees, especially as it would be based on tools that already exist in the Bologna Process, thus avoiding administrative complexity for the institutions. The

Rapporteurs also welcome the decision to base this assessment on existing national agencies and not on a European agency.

In order to move towards a European label and above all a European degree, the Rapporteurs nevertheless consider coordinated action by the Member States to be essential, at the risk of seeing national divergences persist, as these constitute obstacles to the development of joint degrees. At the same time, they call for care to be taken to ensure **compliance with the principle of subsidiarity and specific requirements of Member States**.

6. Encourage other forms of European cooperation than joint degrees

The alliances are certainly 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.

7. Better recognition of staff commitment in transnational cooperation projects and especially in joint programmes

The Rapporteurs thus support the proposal for an **EU Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education** (COM(2024) 145 final) which will contribute to better recognition of the commitment of university staff in transnational cooperation activities, and especially in the alliances. This improved recognition could translate, at national level, into specific allocations to institutions or bonus policies.

8. Roll out the alliance model

The Rapporteurs believe that **all institutions wishing to join an alliance should have the possibility of doing so**. At the same time, it is important to **focus on other tools of European cooperation in higher education**, by not earmarking European label and degree projects for alliance member institutions and by encouraging other means of collaboration, such as bilateral cooperation or existing cross-border alliances.



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