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Investment Pathway for European Universities Initiative

Position Paper by
CIVIS, Europe's Civic University Alliance

CIVIS is a European Civic University formed by the alliance of 11 leading research higher education institutions across Europe: Aix-Marseille Université, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Université libre de Bruxelles, University of Bucharest, University of Glasgow, University of Lausanne, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Sapienza Università di Roma, Paris Lodron University of Salzburg, Stockholm University and Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen.

It brings together a community of more than 470,000 students and 58,000 staff members including 35,000 academics and researchers.

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I. Necessary means

To consolidate and thrive, the European Universities Initiative requires:

- Longer financial support period for Alliances (at least 6 years phases) from the European Union and/or member states, based on periodical evaluation.
- Embeddedness of mobility in European Joint Educational Programmes, through specific funding schemes in the Erasmus+ programme and more flexible rules for some categories of learning mobilities (short-term mobilities, blended programmes, Joint European Degrees, etc.).
- Closer cooperation with member states for updating the educational systems and supporting the participation of HEIs to the new transformative process.
- Joint European led campaigns and actions for promoting European HE offers outside Europe, as part of a European Strategy for Educational Outreach to Non-European Beneficiaries, further placing European HEIs in the global educational market, as competitive players with America and Asia.

II. Policy Background

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) represents a pivotal project at the European Commission's level, aiming to develop a strong and representative European higher education landscape, especially in relation to the global educational market. The Commission's role in this process is crucial, highlighted also by the specific political agenda mentioned in the document, enhancing the participation of the member states to a more cohesive and cooperative higher education community. The new future of the universities depends on the capacity to align to joint ideas and visions, and to strengthen cooperation and mutual trust across all sectors, not only for higher education, but with real impact in economy, social values, cultural enhancement, and others.

As the document emphasises the role of different policy documents proposed at European level, it is equally important to address how several member states have adhered to these visions, shaping national legislation and practices, fostering a stronger and more visible participation of higher education institutions to the EUI, while still preserving the specificities and characteristics of each regional and local community, with respect to democratic values, European citizenship, and transnational cooperation. The new academic model is more and more present in many of the European member states, and this reality should become a pillar of the new investment pathway for European Universities since the support and contribution of each member state plays a fundamental role in assuring the participation of higher education institutions to this transformative process.

While the new European educational landscape may seem like a top-down, political, process, but the real transformation happens at the grassroots level, through each member of the academic community: professors, researchers, administrative staff members, and students.

III. Why

The new cooperation model provided by the EUI represents an important tool for assessing the three directions proposed in the document: synergies, simplification, sustainability, not only for the 60 alliances aimed to be set in place, but especially for redesigning the overall European higher education model in the long future. It is natural that as the alliance's role and presence will grow and become more and more suitable for a competitive higher education system, discrepancies will appear, as the HEIs not part of alliances will face some risks.

The new transformative process must also leave room for discussions about medium- and long-term effects of the success of the alliances. One open question remains whether the alliances will, in a relatively distant future, become more than cooperative entities between different HEIs, as new European HEIs with transnational inter-university campuses spread across several countries. What are the 'indicators' for assessing successful synergies among the partner universities, true simplification of cooperation mechanisms, and valid sustainable HEIs?

IV. What

The new paradigm set by the EUI affects all areas of academic life in Europe, from governance to administration, from academics to researchers, from students to stakeholders, as it sets new processes and practices, while addressing otherwise not so visible challenges. Education, research, mobility, funding, societal impact, professional development, academic values, governance models, are some of the most important aspects reshaped by the new HE models, while member states still seek means and ways in which these proposals can be implemented in each national context. While the proposed document addresses some of these components, we would suggest that it moves the attention from 'areas' such as Education, Research & Innovation, Infrastructure, etc., to the people affected by each aspect: academics, researchers, students, citizens, HEI managers, public authorities, etc. For some of these categories, we are expressing possible pathways in the following sections.

IV.1. Academics

- Promoting European (Joint / Multiple / Double) Degrees as new instruments for valuing academic competencies and reputation at transnational level, allowing academics from several HEIs and countries to cooperate with peers from similar or different areas of interest in designing, developing, and implementing innovative and attractive educational programmes at all levels.
- Setting a European framework for the professionalisation of the teaching profession in higher education, through clear status descriptors, social reputation and valour, connection with other professional bodies and structures, social protection (as we are so closely witnessing the situation with the academics from Ukraine and other countries), European employment through the Alliances / Alliances' legal entities, academic mobility schemes, etc. The aim of such a framework is not only to strengthen a common academic identity across Europe, but especially to provide joint visions for what is and is not an academic staff member in European HEIs, how are they trained and supported across initial and continuing education, what are they needs in the first years of academic professional development and practice, and how do we assure a strong, motivated, and meaningful academic life for the members of these communities.

- Strengthening the importance of the pedagogical dimension when evaluating the role and impact of academics in the overall teaching and learning process in HE, through the promotion of innovative pedagogies, multilingual approaches in teaching and learning, student empowerment in learning experiences, shared trust between students and teachers, etc.
- Developing new and existing funding schemes for academics across Europe, for continuous professional development (through micro-credentials, for example), teaching equipment and tools, digital infrastructure, peer learning sessions, teaching exchange activities, and other similar aspects needed for a successful academic environment in European HEIs. In this sense, as developing digital infrastructures, for example, can be very expensive, cross-alliance funding mechanisms would be needed, to support multiple actors reach similar objectives, as many European Universities Alliances aim to respond to the same challenges.

IV.2. Researchers

- Enhancing the complementarity between funding schemes of the European Union, both on research & innovation, and education, opening research project opportunities for integration in other areas related to HEIs, such as research-based education, teaching models innovation, citizen science, etc.
- Setting a coherent European framework for the professionalisation of the research career in Europe, connected with the new European Universities and the associated research structures, like the processes proposed for the professionalisation of the academic career.
- Supporting smooth research mobility and cooperation inside the alliances and between the alliances, strengthening cooperation among researchers, supporting larger transnational research teams and topics, as well as the affiliation of researchers to transnational research entities linked with the alliances.
- Developing joint training models for researchers across Europe, with a focus on transversal competencies, research ethics, shared knowledge, research societal impact, scientific dissemination, and other related aspects, starting from the doctoral training in each scientific field.
- Joint research infrastructures could foster mobility for researchers and experts, as well as enhancing cooperation between researchers and private sector actors (as analysed under the RIS4CIVIS mapping process). Further work needs to be done to establish common terms of access and use for the Alliances, as Horizon Europe (such as the INFRA-type programmes) may seem somewhat insufficient to respond the Alliances' needs at a wide scale, especially in terms of training and mobility.

IV.3. Students

- Updating the mobility regulations and practices in the Erasmus+ programme and other similar programmes, to support students to participate in international educational programmes, considering the real evaluated costs of living in specific countries across Europe, as well as the need for flexibility for students' mobility programmes (short- and long-term mobility). Moreover, part of the European recovery plan budget could be directed to further enhance the development of competencies and lifelong learning practices across European HE sectors.

- Ensuring smoother academic recognition processes, through digital credentialing, European certification, Erasmus without papers, European Student Card, and other related components, to increase the number of students successfully participating in educational mobility programmes.
- Increasing the presence and role of student representation bodies from European Universities, at policy and representation level, as well as through specific student-led projects at transnational level, supported by Alliances and other support tools of the European Union.
- Developing internship and traineeship opportunities for European Universities students, through partnerships with companies, public authorities, NGOs, and other similar organizations, based on shared interest expressed as part of the objectives of the alliances.
- As some European Universities Alliance's goals go beyond the European geographical area, enlarging their scope and visions to extended cooperations at international level (such as the specific strategic cooperation between CIVIS and universities from Africa), more approaches must be conducted to facilitate the participation of non-EU countries to the educational and research actions of the Alliances, with respect to the specificities and practices of the respective countries, of course. Opening funding opportunities for students, academics, and researchers for cooperation with non-EU partners across the globe, enlarges the impact of the Alliances at a global level.

IV.4. Administrative staff

- Specific funding schemes would be suitable for supporting the engagement of administrative staff members in transnational actions, not just in terms of staff budget and similar components, but also in terms of flexibility of Erasmus+ or other programmes' regulations and practices, in line with everchanging needs and expectations.
- While HEIs across Europe strengthen cooperation at all levels, further actions and objectives are expected to enhance sharing best practices at administrative levels, as well as peer learning activities meant to solve specific problems related to the overall activities of such institutions.

IV.5. Involvement of citizens, civil society, and public bodies / authorities

- The participation of citizens, civil society, and public bodies or authorities in the actions and priorities of the HEIs across Europe is a key component for the development of European Universities Alliance, as their role becomes more and more needed to shape an attractive and dynamic transnational academic community for all its beneficiaries. Alliances need support to facilitate the development of collaborative entities (such as the CIVIS Open Labs), where ideas and actions are put in place to address specific needs and challenges at societal level.
- While the participation of third parties and other beneficiaries to the objectives of the European Universities is still under development, specific changes in the funding schemes must be made to ensure higher flexibility in terms of seed funding projects, student-led initiatives, public bodies' participation to Alliances' actions, enhanced cooperation with the private sector, and other similar initiatives that better integrate the civil society in the academic community and vice versa.