

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE

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Abstract

The EU brought a new player to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The so-called European Universities Initiative (EUI) challenges all its components from students, academics, and higher education institutions to EU institutions and national governments to create the „European universities of the future“. The biggest concern of the EU remains if this idea has the potential to revolutionize higher education across Europe by promoting cross-border collaboration and innovation.

Key words: education, European universities, perspectives, challenges

The main idea of the article is to introduce the reader to the power of EU initiatives in the field of higher education. This is the type of introduction that always works when we want to „smooth talk“ our reader into a sensitive discussion, especially when we do not have relevant information to offer.

The EU introduces the academic community to the European Universities Initiative, a program/project/initiative that does not manage to bring sufficient trust in the hearts and minds of the so-called beneficiaries due to the lack of transparency and bad promotion. Most of the questioned academic members during my activities in 2023 (conferences, seminars, and discussions) recognized their absence of information on this subject.

One of my biggest surprises was the response of the amazing ChatGPT to the question: „*What is EUI?*“ „*As of my knowledge cut-off in September 2021, there is no specific program or initiative known as the European Universities Initiative. However, I can provide you with information on the European Universities project, which might be what you're referring to*“¹.

This article is based on exploratory research, using only secondary research methods like online and literature research. This subject should be the focus of future analysis with primary research methods, but for the moment, I managed to discover only one relevant survey conducted in early 2020 by the European University Association (EUA) on international strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities

¹ ChatGPT, reply to the question: „What is EUI?“, 19.06.2023, <https://chat.openai.com/>, accessed on 19.06.2023. The program ChatGPT was used to obtain a reply to the mentioned question.

Initiative that gathered responses from 219 higher education institutions from 34 systems across Europe². There are no other relevant signs of exploratory attention.

The EU is always busy with new visions and trends for education and culture.

In November 2017, the 28 European Union (EU) leaders outlined initiatives to prove that the education landscape is changing and debated the future of education at the Gothenburg Social Summit in Sweden. In the same month, the European Commission set out a vision for a European Education Area to be built by 2025 „in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders“³.

The European Universities Initiative, which started officially in 2019, is a flagship initiative of the European Education Area to enable a new generation of Europeans to cooperate across languages, borders, and disciplines, developing a strong European identity⁴. The new actor of the EUI is the European Universities, referred to by the European Commission as „transnational alliances that will lead the way towards the universities of the future, promoting European values and identity, and revolutionizing the quality and competitiveness of European higher education“⁵. The definition has become immediately adopted by the participating institutions.

In 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, president of the EC, addressed in the mission letter to Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, the headline missions for education, research, and innovation. One of them is referring „to promoting excellence and networking among European universities“⁶. There should be „a focus on the full implementation of the European Universities Initiative, learning the lessons from the current pilot phase. This will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several European countries and contribute to the international standing and competitiveness of our universities“⁷.

² A.-L. Claeys-Kulik, Th. E. Jørgensen, H. Stöber, et al., (2020), *International strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative. Results of the EUA survey*, European University Association, 27 April, <https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/925:international-strategic-institutional-partnerships-and-the-european-universities-initiative.html>, accessed on 05.06.2023.

³ European Commission, (2017), *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS EMPTY. Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture. The European Commission's contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg, 17 November 2017*, 14.11.2017, COM(2017) 673 final, Strasbourg, p. 11, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0673>, accessed on 10.06.2023

⁴ European Commission, (2022), „Factsheet - European Universities: A key pillar of the European Education Area“, *European Education Area. Quality education and training for all*, 27.07, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-08/european-universities-factsheet-2022%2008-22.pdf>, accessed on 03.06.2023.

⁵ European Commission, „European Universities Initiative“, *European Education Area. Quality education and training for all*, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>, accessed on 01.06.2023.

⁶ U. von der Leyen, (2019), Mission letter-Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, 1 December, Brussels, https://commissioners.ec.europa.eu/document/download/efec75e-3062-4700-b181-a8b5c6c6f298_en?filename=mission-letter-mariya-gabriel-2019_en.pdf, accessed on 10.06.2023

⁷ *Ibidem*

A strong reaction to Ursula von der Leyen's mission letter belongs to the European Civil Society for Education or the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLP). Under the title: *Ursula, where did you hide education?*, the LLP observes that the term education is understood as solely serving markets and competition, and research and innovation are considered useful tools to achieve excellence and inform policymaking⁸. The EUI increases the worries of LLP and makes it reject the vision of education envisioned in terms of innovation, excellence, and competitiveness, disregarding its social dimension - which outnumbers its economic by-products. Also, the EUI leaves a strong impression that education is only possible for young people, thus „violently ignoring the millions of adult learners in Europe, which are confined to labour perspectives“⁹.

The EUI signals an interest in the integrated use of the instruments at the disposal of the EC, at the same time as it demonstrates an interest in the potential of university alliances as an organizational solution to the challenges of effective policy coordination. It is important to remind the desire of the Council of the EU to build bridges for higher education, research, innovation, and society to discover a new dimension in European higher education.

The EU institutions aim to unlock the full potential of the higher education sector as the promoter of skills and knowledge, and as an engine for innovation and solving societal challenges. Incentives for the transformation of universities take a central place in the strategy, which is partly built on the first lessons learned from the EC's program to establish European university alliances that is the European Universities Initiative (EUI)¹⁰.

European Universities have several components, like students, academics, higher education institutions, EU institutions, and national governments that need constant interaction both in virtual and physical spaces, to survive. The EC described smartly in the original communication about the initiative from 2018 that these university alliances should be geographically balanced and socially inclusive. For funding to be sustainable, these universities should be able to draw from a combination of EU and national resources¹¹.

Charret and Chankseliani remind us that the EC indicated in the same document mentioned above, that there would „be no one-size-fits-all model“. Institutions can propose a model that suits their needs through a bottom-up, open, and transparent

⁸ Lifelong Learning Platform, (2019), „Ursula, where did you hide education? - REACTION TO NEW COMMISSIONERS' PORTFOLIOS“, *Education as a public good*, 10 September, Brussels, <http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/LLLP-Reaction-to-new-Commissioners-Sept-2019.pdf>, accessed on 10.06.2023

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ P. Maassen, B. Stensaker and A. Rosso, (2022), „The European university alliances - an examination of organizational potentials and perils“, *Higher Education*, p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00951-4>, accessed on 01.06.2023

¹¹ European Commission, (2018) 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. Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies, Brussels, 22.5.2018, COM(2018) 268 final, p. 8, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0268>, accessed on 01.06.2023.

approach and develop the level of ambition gradually.¹² The authors argued that the European Universities were seen as an experiment rather than a reproduction¹³.

In 2019, the Council of the European Union underlines the mission of the *pilot* European Universities' experiences and lessons learned to inform policymaking and the further development of related cooperation in education and training, and by exploring the need to take forward appropriate policies for the European Universities¹⁴. In 2021, the Council describes European Universities as:

- „testbeds“ for innovative teaching and research, including academic career assessment and rewarding systems that take into account *inter alia* open science practices, quality of teaching, transfer of knowledge, and outreach;
- „testbeds“ for the development of interoperability and promotion of cooperation between Member States regarding European research, teaching, and staff career development practices;
- different models for cooperation and being thematically open;
- pilot alliances¹⁵.

The European Universities Initiative: main challenges and perspectives

To assess the future development of the EUI, the European Parliament created three scenarios that reflect the main driving forces behind the shaping of higher education in Europe: the Bologna Process, the development of the EEA, and innovations in learning and teaching¹⁶.

Scenario Orange emphasizes the force of the Bologna Process and the role of the national governments in shaping the EHEA and the future conditions for the university alliances. This scenario would require at least some kind of legal status for the alliances to institutionalize. There are two possibilities for institutionalization, not mutually exclusive. One is establishing European Universities by intergovernmental treaty, build upon the regulative framework developed by the Bologna Process. The

¹² A. Charret, M. Chankseliani, (2022), „The process of building European university alliances: a rhizomatic analysis of the European Universities Initiative“, *Higher Education*, p.1, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00898-6>, accessed on 01.06.2023.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 14

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, (2019), „Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems“, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 18.11., (2019/C 389/01), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019G1118\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019G1118(01)&from=EN), accessed on 01.06.2023

¹⁵ Council of the European Union, (2021), *Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation, and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education*, 17 May, 8658/21, Brussels, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49659/st08658-en21.pdf>, accessed on 03.06.2023.

¹⁶ Craciun, D., Kaiser, F., Kottmann, A. and Van der Meulen, B., (2023), *Research for CULT Committee - The European Universities Initiative, first lessons, main challenges and perspectives*, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels, pp. 56-57, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU\(2023\)733105](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2023)733105), accessed on 11.06.2023.

governments involved in the treaty can adapt the regulations to the specific aims and mission of the alliance. The second option is that the European Commission creates a legal statute for a European University, to facilitate these intergovernmental treaties. These options have clear implications for the governance of an alliance, as they require much more involvement of national governments in the governance of the university. It is uncertain whether universities will accept such an influence¹⁷.

Scenario Pink offers a stronger role of the European Commission, implementation of its current strategy for universities, followed by extending the strategy to further shape the European Education Area. This scenario will require increased resources, also as support schemes for students. For the European Universities Initiative, a mix of EU and national funding is needed to cover extra costs due to the inclusion goals of the policy instrument and to counterbalance the financial limits of HEIs from economically disadvantaged Member States¹⁸.

Scenario Blue presents the idea of a disruption or full transformation of the current higher education, creating a new academic model to which higher education institutions need to adapt. According to experts, the main opportunity of this scenario is that it is very student-centred. It also makes the HEIs more responsive to the labour market needs¹⁹.

The EP also has considered a null scenario in which the European Universities' alliances do not survive because the Commission and Member States do not create a facilitative, regulative framework for the alliances. In such a scenario HEIs within EUAs must conclude that the transaction costs exceed the benefits²⁰.

The Future of the European University Initiative

From 2019 until 2023, 44 European Universities' alliances were created, with 340 participating higher education institutions.

The EU institutions presented their main assessments of the main benefits and challenges of the current EUI. One common ground is that it is too early to assess the impact of the EUI at the national and EEA level. EUI is still considered a pilot with the mission to innovate education and improve transnational collaboration. The developed activities foster mutual learning, sharing best practices, and experiencing new educational approaches.

The European Parliament considers the current model of operation of the European Universities as unsustainable. The funding from the EUI does not cover actual transaction costs and the options to use other funds are unclear. Transaction costs are unnecessarily high due to incompatible regulatory frameworks. Also, European Universities face serious obstacles in realizing the ambitions of the EUI. The challenges include finding an appropriate governance structure, ensuring long-term funding, having clarity about awarding credits and degrees, and removing the legal and administrative barriers²¹.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 57-59

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 60

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 56

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 64

The Council of the European Union underlines in the *European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe*²², the importance of the EUI for accomplishing key objectives like strengthening the European dimension in higher education, research, and innovation as well as the synergies between them; driving Europe's global role and leadership; bolstering Europe's recovery and response to the digital and green transitions; deepening the European sense of belonging based on common values.

The Council acknowledged that European Universities should develop a common agenda, shared infrastructures, and resources as well as establish ever stronger alliances by exploring the feasibility of joint enrolment of students and joint recruitment of academics and researchers, within the different national systems, to make their education and research careers more attractive, sustainable, and flexible within the alliances. It also invited the Commission and the Member States to consider more sustainable funding instruments for the European Universities, including through exploiting synergies of regional and national with European schemes, so that they can deliver on their ambitious strategy as well as develop clear proposals²³.

The European higher institutions perceive the need to provide additional resources, considerable amounts of co-funding, and ensure long-term sustainability as the most challenging for participating in the European Universities Initiative. The lack of resources is also high on the list of reasons for institutions to not participate in the European Universities Initiative, together with time constraints as well as the difficulty to find partners²⁴.

Among mentioned challenges, we should put on list language and cultural barriers; institutional autonomy and diversity; unequal participation; inclusivity and accessibility. The initiative must address barriers to participation and ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all students and staff, including those from underrepresented backgrounds or disadvantaged regions.

Conclusions

I continue to sustain that „as members of the European Union, we share a common identity, values, dreams, and a list of priorities. Nevertheless, the EU has a major problem in developing citizen-oriented and barrier-free information and communication“²⁵.

²² Council of the European Union, (2022), *Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe*, 6 April, 7936/22, Brussels, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7936-2022-INIT/en/pdf>, accessed on 11.06.2023.

²³ *Ibidem*

²⁴ Claeys-Kulik, A.-L., Jørgensen, Th. E., Stöber, H. et al., (2020), *International strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative. Results of the EUA survey*, European University Association, 27 April, pp. 23-26, <https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/925:international-strategic-institutional-partnerships-and-the-european-universities-initiative.html>, accessed on 11.06.2023.

²⁵ M. A. Balosin, (2022), „Today's EU: „Sexy“ or „Dull“?“, *Papers from the Ninth International Scientific Conference of the European Studies Department, Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ RE-NEW EU - RECOVERY, REOPENING AND REVIVAL*, Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“, Hanns Seidel Foundation, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Sofia, p. 215.

A vision for 2025 would be a Europe in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent, where spending time in another Member State – to study, to learn, or to work – has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm. A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity.

The biggest concern of the European education civil society remains if the notion of protecting and promoting European values and identity, or the 'European way of life' will be able to involve all people and civil society in Europe. The purpose of all EU educational programs is not to be limited to a decadent system, complying with market needs and fulfilling economic desires, but to serve the learners, empower the teachers and educators, and represent a solid tool for the inclusion of all²⁶.

European Universities should become key elements of the European Education Area by driving excellence and acting as models of good practice for other higher education institutions, progressively increasing the international competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. Overall, the European Universities Initiative is crucial in promoting collaboration, mobility, and excellence in European higher education. By fostering transnational partnerships and emphasizing interdisciplinary approaches, innovation, and entrepreneurship, the initiative strives to create a more connected, competitive, and dynamic European higher education landscape.

We need to remember that the 'European Universities' are still in their early stages and more evaluation and evidence-based information is needed on the selected 44 pilots and their outcomes to support coherent and forward-looking policies.

Among the well-known recommendations, we should remind that the EUI needs to improve the financial position of the participants; develop a consistent regulatory framework; reconsider selection criteria and expected impacts; maintain benefits and monitor progress; foster inclusivity and diversity; expand collaboration beyond Higher Education; assure continuous monitoring and feedback.

The European Universities Initiative has the potential to revolutionize higher education across Europe by promoting cross-border collaboration. The goals of the initiative are aligned with the vision of a unified European education area, which aims to enhance the mobility of students and researchers, promote innovation, and increase competitiveness in higher education.

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²⁶ Lifelong Learning Platform, *op. cit.*

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