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# Position paper on the European University initiative.



# European University Foundation

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## An alliance of universities



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# EUF position paper on the European University initiative

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### Introduction

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The recent proposal of establishing European Universities initiatives has been positively welcomed by member university representatives during the last Council of Rectors meeting, even more so since it marks the return of discussions about the importance of higher education and student mobility to the upper echelons of European policy-making for the first time in nearly 20 years.

The impact of the proposal on the agenda of European higher education institutions is considerable, as it has already set multiple alliances and initiatives in motion. This has happened even before specific goals or funding have been announced, which is revealing of how positively the initiative's central ideas have been received.

### Remit of this paper

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The EUF has been actively involved in the EU-level discussions about the European Universities initiative and has already endorsed the idea in a discussion paper for the European Parliament in November 2017. As Rapporteur of one of the expert groups convened by the European Commission, the European University Foundation (EUF) has also put forward concrete recommendations about the need to cater for scalable and diverse approaches, as well as on the importance of such projects being deeply rooted in the strategy of the involved universities.

As noted during the EUF Council of Rectors 2018 meeting, the exact name of the proposal is still to be defined and is therefore mentioned in this paper as "European University initiative". This paper addresses aspects of the discussion for which clarity is urgently needed: the focus and systemic impact of European University initiative.

## Focus

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The cooperation model of European University initiative should be based on the three pillars of the universities' mission: research, education and innovation. As it is unlikely that all proposals will address all three strands simultaneously, the call for proposals should take this into account and allow universities to plan the roll-out of their initiative to gradually cover all three aspects. EUF member universities have outlined examples of eligible activities under Annex 1 of this position paper.

It is noteworthy that President Macron's speech, the conclusions of the Social Summit in Gothenburg, the framework put forward by the European Commission and the stance of stakeholders such as the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education showed the importance of **elevating the quality and quantity of student and staff mobility in Europe**. The European University initiative should therefore also cater for increased mobility through their activities.

The initiative should thus be anchored in the Erasmus+ programme and **support innovative approaches** to advancing student mobility, as well as far more **intense and structured cooperation** among the staff of the concerned institutions. If appropriately structured, this will have positive spillover effects concerning enhanced research cooperation and in tackling societal challenges.

Higher Education institutions such as the University of Luxembourg, along with many business and engineering schools, have shown how mobility can become the norm rather than the exception. The outcomes of the European Universities initiative should **propel the European Education Area to go well beyond the current milestone of 20% of mobile graduates**, by making it possible for students to study in multiple locations

and in cross-border curricula. This will contribute considerably to creating a new generation of active European citizens, which are aware of different academic, social and economic possibilities.

European University initiatives should be invited to make explicit commitments about the increase in the quality and quantity of exchanges they will set out to achieve. Other indicators that ought to be considered would include decreasing social selectivity in international activities, promoting academic excellence and social innovation.

## Funding

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The funding allocated to these initiatives should enable European Universities to make a difference with existing funding schemes supporting transnational cooperation and learning mobility. It is highly recommended that successful activities and cooperation models that can be replicated should be considered for funding to contribute to the modernisation of all European universities in general.

EUF member universities also recommend seeking geographical balances, to ensure that all EU member states are represented in these future initiatives. While the EUF noted that such European university initiatives should benefit member states first and foremost, the network members would like to be able to invite partner country universities to such initiatives as well.

The 20 European Universities should be encouraged to adopt and further develop common high quality public digital infrastructures to avoid redundancy with existing initiatives and develop the same or similar digital infrastructures in parallel. The public digital infrastructure is notably based on projects such as Erasmus without

Paper, the European Student Card, or the forthcoming EU online learning hub (eU.university) and European University initiatives should in this sense act as role models in adopting such digital workflows and platforms.

The funding provided for such European Universities should be allocated over the longest funding period possible in the new programme, in order to guarantee the holistic involvement of students, academic staff and university leaders. The outline of clear milestones and indicators throughout the funding period will ensure an efficient and ambitious planning of such initiatives. This also clearly calls for a substantial increase in the funding made available for the Erasmus+ programme in the upcoming multiannual financial framework.

## A greater ambition

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When the idea of European Universities was launched in September 2017, it spoke of a great ambition: the establishment of European universities as independent legal entities. However, this vision is unlikely to become a reality in the near future, owing to numerous legislative shortcomings. **A European degree status** would be a helpful step forward, particularly if it is backed by **streamlined quality assurance mechanisms**, to empower academic and scientific staff to work across multiple jurisdictions.

The Council and the European Institutions must join forces to tackle such challenges, and we call upon them to publish a roadmap containing key milestones that pave the way for a much more integrated European Education Area.

## Possible shortcomings

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The forthcoming European Universities could become solely focused on enacting an “EU Excellence initiative”, with little consideration for the key political goals of the European Universities proposal that was initially envisaged: to advance EU citizenship and values through student mobility and cooperation.

While the perspective of gaining privileged access to supplementary research funding is highly attractive, it should be underlined that the European Universities initiative should also focus on educational and civic impact. Promoting excellence in education should not play second fiddle to excellence in research, nor contribute to the cartelisation of the European research landscape.

## Conclusion

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The EUF and its member universities have reviewed with enthusiasm the first proposals for creating European Universities and consider it is an opportunity to advance excellence in cooperation and bringing forward the European Education Area. Therefore, the EUF is committed to support its member universities in developing such ambitious and impactful cooperation models under the upcoming calls for proposals.

# ANNEX

## Annex 1 – Identified activities and challenges

### What activities are most interesting to be implemented through European Universities initiatives?

- Ambition to support clusters of excellent in student mobility;
- Emphasis on embedding mobility in the curricula as a stepping stone to engage many more students in Erasmus (50%? 100%?);
- Emphasis on innovative pedagogies and student-centred learning;
- Development of a culture of curriculum design/development in European higher education that includes essential contributions from research, industry and society;
- Special focus on Joint (degree) programmes;
- Emphasis on delivery of jointly designed programmes by international consortia of European higher education institutions (together with economic and social partners), which will increase the quality of programmes and their delivery;
- Emphasis on priority study areas such as STE(A)M, clean energy, environment, etc., on which such networks/clusters should build their competitive position in the world;
- Emphasis on mobility for training;
- Innovative pedagogical instruments, the development of which should be strongly supported.

### What activities could have greater focus in the discussions about European University initiatives?

- Greater emphasis on how big data could be used to power intensive cooperation. Tools like the Online Learning Agreement could be harnessed to embed mobility in the curricula in a timely and cost-effective way;
- In relation to joint programmes, emphasis needs to be placed on combating the weaknesses of initiatives already in place in the context of joint programmes in Europe generally. For example, there is a need to guarantee (by means of external audit and control mechanisms as well as self-regulation) the implementation of good practices;
- Greater emphasis on the importance of staff mobility, especially educational and research visits for a longer period than standard Erasmus+ staff mobility, which may contribute to exchange of good practices and strengthening of cooperation (i.e. visiting professor);
- The need to consider greater EU support for the implementation of recognised short-term study/training mobility (since students tend to increasingly engage in professional activities already during their studies);
- The important aspect of research cooperation in the university networks, which should be strongly linked to educational cooperation.

## What are the main challenges that have been identified at this stage?

- The application process and eligibility criteria should be as open as possible, the aim being to challenge universities to be bold and creative in their proposals;
- There is a need for further clarity on what new and innovative proposals are being made in the European university initiative, in terms of improving the quality of teaching and learning processes: what guarantee is there that European Universities initiatives will do better than they have already done to date?
- The number of universities in consortia should be flexible depending on the scope and type of common actions;
- The risk of holding back development in already well-established bilateral cooperation in delivery of programmes (i.e. double diplomas), as the priority will be given to larger consortia;
- Administrative and bureaucratic obstacles at national level;
- Uncertainty about sources of financing of such networks in longer term.



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