Navigating the future of European Universities Alliances: The Student Perspective

Policy Brief by the Erasmus Student Network

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Introduction

As we enter the fourth year of implementing the European Universities Initiative (EUI), it is evident that numerous conversations and discussions are underway. These dialogues serve to recognise the achievements of the initiative thus far while also tackling the challenges associated with its implementation and the long-term sustainability of the Alliances. The ambition set by the European Council back in 2017 for the European Universities to enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries[1], does not seem unattainable anymore, showing that there is still a long path to walk before the full transformative potential of the initiative is reached within the desired timeframe.

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is fully supportive of the European Universities Initiative (EUI) and celebrates the progress achieved by the alliances. ESN is engaged in a majority of alliances through the ESN local associations and is witnessing plentiful good practices in student engagement. In this policy brief, we will look at the progress of the European Universities, reflecting on the access to international learning opportunities and the future of the Alliances, presenting a set of recommendations deriving from ESN's own research and on-the-ground experience.

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[1] European Council meeting (14 December 2017) – Conclusions,
https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf

1. Values and Objectives of the Alliances

The European Union has embarked on a transformative journey to build on a diverse and flourishing higher education sector, deeply rooted in European culture. The European Universities Initiative is expected to have a unique role in achieving the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), in synergy with the European Higher Education Area commitments. The political ambition surrounding European Universities is high, often looking up to the initiative as a revolutionary solution to significantly boost the competitiveness of European higher education, research and innovation globally, in a relatively short period of time.

The European Universities Initiative further seeks to promote common European values and strengthen a European identity among students, staff and researchers. The Erasmus Student Network welcomes these objectives and recognises the pivotal role that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in fostering those values. **ESN is fully committed to working towards the common values enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union[2] through our thousands of activities across Europe and beyond.**

At the same time, ESN is concerned about the narrative of "European values'' built around the initiative, considering it can lead to a discrepancy between the ambition set by the initiative and the messages sent to the audience. In times when the European Union is striving to strengthen its geopolitical role, enlargement to the Western Balkans and transform European Higher Education in a way that it becomes attractive to students from all around the world, the references to European values in certain contexts could be perceived as exclusionary, rather than inclusive. ESN does believe that the initiative should remain value-driven and that strengthening European integration should remain its priority. However, ESN suggests a shift in the initiative's branding towards "common internationalisation values", which would emphasise the universal characteristics of the European values. Such a shift could substantially increase the global attractiveness of the initiative and reinforce the global role of the Alliances, while at the same time, it will continue building up the European project.

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[2] Treaty of the European Union, Article 2

2. Social Dimension of the European Universities Initiative

ESN shares the fundamental vision for the European Universities Initiative and the pivotal role of Higher Education Institutions in society as **drivers for integration**. European Universities are supposed to act as role models for best practices and raise the quality, attractiveness, and competitiveness of European Higher Education on a global scale. At the same time, societal impact and community involvement are still essential to the concept of European Universities. The expectation is that they will *"also contribute to the sustainable economic development of the regions where they are located, as their students will work closely with businesses, municipal authorities, academics, and researchers to find solutions to the challenges their regions are facing."*[3]

The Erasmus Student Network agrees that networking and societal engagement are essential to achieve this target and strengthen the civic role of universities by empowering exchanges, which entails collaboration and peer-to-peer exchange of thoughts with common understanding and respect. Therefore, ESN distinguishes three factors that facilitate the networking potential: seamless mobility, student engagement and recognition.

2.1. European University Alliances as Facilitators of Seamless Mobility

The Erasmus Student Network has been researching and analysing student mobility in higher education since 2005, through its flagship research project ESNsurvey[4]. Despite the enormous success and improvements in the way student mobility operates, there are still a number of pressing challenges to achieving seamless mobility, concerning access to opportunities, funding, and recognition. ESN strongly advocates that learning mobility in education should be the norm, rather than the exception and that **learning mobility opportunities should be accessible and possible for everyone.** Therefore, we acknowledge the transformative potential of European Alliances in this matter, and firmly believe in the power of the initiative to contribute to a progressive advancement in achieving seamless mobility, removing barriers to mobility such as portability of grants and automatic mutual recognition of learning outcomes.

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[3] European Commission, 2019
[4] https://www.esn.org/ESNsurvey

The European Alliances should be perceived as a space for testing out different approaches, mechanisms and initiatives in making seamless mobility possible. If successful, these initiatives could be spilled over to other HEIs, or even the entire higher education sector, increasing even further the impact and significance of the Alliances. The focus should be on facilitating student mobility by enabling flexible learning pathways, improving the use of ECTS, and focusing on the learning outcomes.

2.2. Access to international opportunities and student outreach

The European University Alliances exist to create opportunities, building on transnational cooperation, and enabling students to seamlessly take part in international learning opportunities. While the EU's flagship programme Erasmus+ benefits from a large popularity, the European Universities being a relatively new initiative, needs an enhanced approach to communication and outreach to the student population. During the analysis of the XV ESNsurvey preliminary results we understood by asking non-mobile students, what initiatives from the EU they know (figure 1), that only 18% of the 3.064 respondents know about the European Universities Initiative. This underscores the need for improved outreach efforts to raise awareness and expand its reach among students.
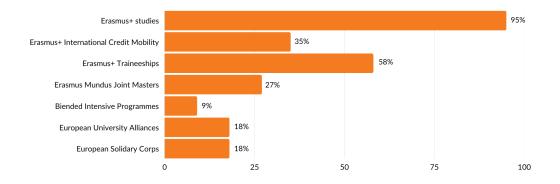

Figure 1: Which of the following education initiatives funded by the EU have you heard of?

To better understand students' perceptions of the Alliances, their access to new learning opportunities and the challenges encountered, ESN conducted an internal survey. This survey

was open for responses earlier in 2023 and targeted ESN local associations within Higher Education Institutions that are part of the alliances. The survey collected 66 responses from a total of 51 ESN sections and 54 Higher Education Institutions, covering 28 European Universities Alliances.

When survey participants were asked **about students' perceptions of the Alliances** and their importance for higher education, four major topics prevailed among the survey participants:

- **Increased Learning Opportunities:** A significant number of the respondents emphasised the importance of the alliances in providing students more information about the opportunities available. These opportunities encompass a diverse range of initiatives and activities in which students can actively engage and are closely linked to the themes of student empowerment and civic engagement in both local and global contexts.
- **International connectivity:** the relevance of the alliances is also connected to their capacity to link and create connections between HEIs and students all over Europe, building relationships that go beyond single-project collaborations and mobility.
- **More mobility:** the third factor is closely associated with the facilitation of learning mobility. The prospect of increased opportunities and a simplified participation process were viewed as highly attractive and central features of the Alliances. This highlights the Alliances' role in making mobility more accessible and efficient for students.
- **European identity:** the respondents assign significant importance to the need to enhance the European identity of young students, which can be facilitated through the numerous opportunities promoted by the EUI.

It is clear that students attribute high importance to the transformative role of alliances in higher education, and have ambitious expectations from them. Moreover, students believe that the alliances can create significant academic benefits for the student representation in the alliances' HEIs, such as:

- strengthened role of students in shaping a more harmonised European higher education and institutional structures;
- more opportunities for international projects and course collaboration in interdisciplinary and problem-solving areas;
- shared resources and research cooperation;

- access to courses offered at the partner universities, increasing the quality of the curriculum and enriching the academic experience;
- professional networking opportunities;
- learning new languages.

However, in practice, these optimistic expectations have not yet been fully realised. This can be attributed to the fact that many of the alliances are still in the initial stages of the implementation of their work packages, and it is thus far to jump to conclusions about their success in reaching their objectives. On the other hand, it is important to pay closer attention to the implementation of the initiative, in order to identify bottlenecks at early stages and design measures to prevent non-functional opportunities and waste of resources. Every challenge along the way of the roll-out of the Alliances might represent an obstacle to participation in the learning opportunities, which would consequently put in danger the overall success and impact of the initiative

One of the primary challenges highlighted by the survey respondents revolves around student outreach. The respondents shared that they learned about the alliances either through their HEI online communication channels (31%), direct contacts from representatives of the alliances (26%), or through ESN International or ESN National Organisations (27.6%). A common concern among the surveyed students is that the alliances struggle to conduct effective communication and engagement strategies, which in turn generates confusion among students, who are not enough informed about the activities provided by their HEIs, and consequently do not take full advantage of them.

Access to information is considered a major factor for inclusive education and learning mobility [5] and the alliances' efforts in implementing effective promotion are crucial for this objective. **Lack of information creates a series of barriers, such as confusion among students, and leads to low student involvement.** In line with the student-centred approach rooted in the European Universities Initiative, ESN emphasises the importance of engagement and collaboration with student organisations and representatives when planning and conducting outreach strategies and activities. Peer-to-peer networks should have a crucial role in raising awareness and improving access to learning opportunities, encouraging participation and providing support.

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[5] Allinson K., Gabriels W.,(2021). Maybe it will be different abroad; student and staff perspectives on diversity and inclusion in student exchanges. SIEM Research Report, siem-project.eu

Student Engagement

ESN acknowledges the significant progress made by the Alliances in engaging with the student representatives. There are already a number of successful practices in establishing student governance structures within the alliances, allowing Student boards to participate in the decision-making process. In this way, we welcome these examples and reiterate the importance of increasing even further student involvement in order for students to have a meaningful involvement in the alliances. **Advanced student participation in the alliance's development and management will create a large number of follow-up benefits and will lead to increased student interest and engagement in the opportunities provided by Alliances**.

The respondents surveyed by ESN shared that student engagement should play an essential role in shaping the nature, governance and activities of the alliances, and a special role is assigned to student organisations. Moreover, they addressed the following:

- **Need for an Improved Student Involvement:** The respondents expressed the need for students not only to be heard but also to have the power to vote on and influence alliances' decisions. This underscores the importance of giving students a significant say in how alliances develop and which opportunities they offer in correspondence with a student-centred approach.
- **Benefits of Working with Student Organisations:** The respondents highlight the benefits of collaborating with student organisations. These organisations have a deep understanding of student's needs and can effectively disseminate information about alliance activities directly to the audience. They also have experience in event planning and can contribute to a rich knowledge bank.
- **Student Support:** Participants in the newly created mobility opportunities by the Alliances will need support in all stages of their mobility experience, similarly to any other exchange programme. Several practical examples of activities and initiatives that student associations could implement are mentioned, such as buddy programmes for mobility students, social events, conferences, workshops, and more. These initiatives can enhance the overall student experience within the alliances, contributing to a quality educational experience and increasing the satisfaction of students with the alliances.

- **Collaboration Between Student Organisations:** The respondents claim that representatives from the different student organisations should be directly involved in the alliances' student boards and other decision-making bodies so they can bring diverse perspectives and ensure that various student groups are being represented. This collaborative approach can provide a broader range of representation and activities, fostering additional layers of cooperation.
- **Challenges in Collaboration:** Some respondents raised concerns about the challenges of collaboration with student organisations, including issues related to recognition, roles, and power dynamics. It is noted that the alliances are still evolving and experimenting with their resources to find a suitable balance, but it is recommended that student organisations are given more trust in their crucial role as student representatives.

Students must perceive the value of their voices and comprehend the importance of international cooperation and their potential societal impact. These factors contribute to meaningful student participation and engagement, aligning with the strategy of creating a new form of citizenship rooted in values such as tolerance, equality, open-mindedness, social trust, and cohesion. While ESN emphasises the importance of student representatives in alliance governance, **it also calls for greater attention to be given to involving all student bodies in alliances, promoting peer-to-peer engagement between student associations, sports clubs, and other student-led organisations.** These opportunities strengthen the sense of belonging for students participating in mobility programmes and can have a stronger multiplier effect and facilitate knowledge transfer, retention and dissemination.

2.3. The role of Alliances in achieving full automatic mutual recognition of learning outcomes

Despite the progress made in recognition of learning outcomes from a period of study abroad, there are still a number of pressing challenges, and it is still difficult to speak about full automatic mutual recognition of credits and qualifications in Europe.[6] The situation varies from

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[6] ESN has provided a deeper analysis of the automatic mutual recognition in higher education, including a set of recommendations in the policy brief "How to ensure Automatic Mutual Recognition of Learning Periods Abroad for all students?", published in June 2023, https://www.esn.org/news/how-ensure-automatic-mutual-recognition-learning-periods-abroad-all-students

country to country and even from university to university, which makes the overall picture very fragmented and difficult to evaluate and improve.

In this sense, the **European University Alliances could have a key role in advancing automatic recognition and making higher education more flexible.** EUAs are in a unique position to develop systems to obtain administrative data from mobility taking place between their HEIs and to involve academics in identifying potential challenges and bottlenecks. This could lead to building mechanisms for effective and continuous decision-making in recognition, reaching new levels of synergy and deeper trust between HEIs. ESN believes that as part of the ongoing discussions on a monitoring framework for the European University Alliances, it is truly important to understand which initiatives the Alliances have already put in place to facilitate credit recognition and whether they have achieved progress.

European Universities can have a transformative role in constructing a more attractive and flexible higher education in Europe. Building on the new learning opportunities provided by the Alliances, a renewed discussion on mobility windows and their particularities should be launched. **Embedding mobility windows in the learning programmes will not only contribute to the internationalisation of higher education by allowing more flexibility, but it will also significantly improve credit recognition of learning outcomes** and would lead to safer and easier credit transfer processes, making the mobility experience much less stressful for students. Courses and programmes should be designed with an international approach, focusing on the learning outcomes. Alliances should be more ambitious, and when developing their programmes and mobility windows should be part of the learning path in their HEIs, meeting the needs of students and catching up with fast-paced trends in a globalised world with a constantly changing labour market.

3. The Future of Alliances: safeguarding a sustainable continuation of the Initiative

3.1. Investment Pathways

In the ongoing discussions on the future of the initiative from the financial perspective, ESN advocates for a 7-year funding framework, emphasising its potential to reduce bureaucratic

hurdles and enhance alliance efficiency. This proposal recognises the benefits of providing alliances with a stable financial outlook, allowing them to focus more on their core missions. We propose a mechanism for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to request additional funding during mid-term reviews based on their quantitative and qualitative performance indicators. This strategy will encourage HEIs to continually strive for excellence and align funding with tangible outcomes. Additionally, ESN has developed the following set of recommendations:

- **Role of ECHE and Monitoring:** ESN calls for clarification of the ECHE's role in monitoring universities that are part of alliances. ESN underscores the importance of HEIs in alliances fully embracing the ECHE principles and suggests a monitoring system involving National Agencies. This recommendation aims to strengthen accountability and adherence to European standards.

- **Mobility and International Opportunities:** ESN emphasises the central role that seamless mobility should continue to have in future funding schemes. This approach supports flexible learning pathways, better utilisation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and a sharper focus on learning outcomes. ESN suggests common systems for mobility management and resource pooling among universities to eliminate participation barriers and enhance recognition.

- **Non-University Stakeholders:** Recognising the value of associate partners, ESN suggests revising funding structures to allow them to receive funding from the calls. This change would enable greater participation of stakeholders in critical areas such as civic and student engagement.

- **Inclusivity and openness of the Initiative:** ESN stresses the importance of keeping the initiative open and inclusive, and recommends allocating a portion of funds to support the creation of new alliances and involvement of new HEIs to existing ones, ensuring diversity and fresh perspectives.

- **Synergies with the Third Mission of universities:** ESN highlights the potential link between the third mission of universities (serving society) and the current funding focus. In this sense, we suggest exploring synergies with the CERV funds, especially in collaboration with European NGOs. With this approach, we aim to foster community engagement and societal impact.

3.2. Legal Frameworks for University Alliances

ESN embraces the ambition for a legal framework governing European University Alliances, recognising the potential for deeper student integration through a more student-centric approach to administrative processes and regulatory matters. The legal status of Alliances is necessary to fulfil the ambitions to strengthen European cooperation in education. It would allow better grant portability, automatic recognition of learning outcomes, simplified internal and external quality assurance processes, and improved communication at all levels to ensure informative value for all stakeholders. ESN also encourages the inclusion of pathways for meaningful student participation within these legal frameworks, advocating for such in the legal statutes of European Universities.

3.3. Monitoring framework

The European University Initiative is supposed to follow a strong political agenda and it is designed to be an impactful policy instrument for the achievement of EEA, ERA, and the EHEA, driving Europe's global role and leadership in research and innovation. There are no indicators or specific targets that the alliances need to reach, but the policy objectives of the initiative are ambitious enough. While this setting may make the monitoring difficult, it also allows more freedom in designing the monitoring framework, aimed at assessing the outcomes and transformative potential of the initiative. Europe relies heavily on the success of the alliances, which makes monitoring and evaluation extremely important for the future sustainability of this policy project.

The Erasmus Student Network welcomes the co-creation process of the monitoring framework which the European Commission has undertaken and highlights the importance of setting clear priorities in the analysis of the alliances, evaluating:

- **Results**: the alliances create new learning and mobility opportunities which clearly contribute to the internationalisation of higher education. However, ESN believes that alliances can play a key role in improving the quality of already existing initiatives for inter-institutional cooperation. The monitoring framework could analyse the existing practices of alliance members for advancing in key aspects of student mobility, such as credit recognition, grants portability and community engagement initiatives. These improvements can have a positive impact on the entire higher education sector.

- **Student engagement:** the monitoring framework should seek to understand what kind of initiatives the alliances put in place to increase student engagement. It is important to analyse this not only because the alliances have a commitment to create an environment where student bodies can participate in building learning pathways, but also because student engagement could lead to strengthening the multiplier effect, and facilitate knowledge sharing, retention and dissemination of opportunities.
- **Ongoing initiatives:** while some alliances may not be producing the desired quantitative results yet, they may have set joint structures and coordination mechanisms which will enable them to increase their mobility numbers in the near future. Analysing this kind of progress is an important aspect of fair evaluation, acknowledging efforts made in the right direction.
- **Promotion of academic opportunities**: ESN believes that the alliances can have a key role in promoting full-degree mobility from their members to their students and young people who have not yet begun their higher education journey. This can have a positive impact on universities that are not that internationalised yet.

Additionally, ESN believes that **more data about the performance of the alliances should be gathered and made public.** This would enable more active and fruitful cooperation with non-university stakeholders, including students, for the further development and quality functioning of the alliances. In this way, ESN recommends a more elaborated analysis of the initiative's rollout with more data being included in the **Erasmus+ Annual Report**. Currently, only a very brief data segment with results from the application calls is featured in the Erasmus+ Annual Reports. Making use of other existing tools to track progress on learning mobility in higher education made by the alliances, is also extremely important.