

Research for CULT Committee – The European Universities Initiative: first lessons, main challenges and perspectives



KEY FINDINGS

The selection process complies with the Erasmus+ objectives. EUAs with experienced HEIs in transnational cooperation were more likely to be selected, due to the objective of the EUI to develop innovative models of transnational cooperation at the institutional level.

The criterion of including HEIs from at least three EU countries effectively addresses the importance of fair participation, ensures the geographical balance, and makes the EUI an important instrument for European integration.

The current model of operation of the alliances is unsustainable and the alliances face serious obstacles in realising the ambitions of the EUI.

The EUAs are perceived as an opportunity to innovate education, increase the attractiveness and quality of educational offers, and improve transnational collaboration.

To realise the EUIs' ambitions, more coordination is needed to develop a coherent regulatory framework for the EAU activities in higher education, research, innovation and community engagement.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on [The European Universities Initiative: first lessons, main challenges and perspectives](#). The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: bit.ly/3XF2KUX

The study assesses the European Universities Initiative (EUI) and the European Universities alliances (EUAs). Its results aim to support the European Parliament (EP) in:

- supervising and assessing the European Commission's (EC) existing work on the EUI and planned interventions;
- making evidence-informed decisions in its role as co-legislator with the Council of the European Union;
- assessing the degree to which the EUI supports the EP Resolution on the European Education Area (EEA) (2021) that calls for intensified collaboration and the use of synergies between the EEA, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area.

The EUI started in the autumn of 2019. The first EUAs had to delay the activities in their initial phase because of the Covid-19 restrictions. Therefore, the EUI is still in its initial phase and the EUAs could not unfold as planned.

The main results of our assessment of *the selection process* are:

- The selection process initially favoured older, larger, comprehensive universities because these institutions had experience in managing international collaborations and could comply with the list of criteria and expected impacts.
- The selection process complies with the Erasmus+ objectives. The EUI is a policy measure aimed at developing an innovative model of transnational cooperation at the institutional level. To fulfil this objective, participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to have the relevant operational capacity and resources.
- However, experts foresee that future alliances need to specialise in order to successfully engage their staff, attract sufficient funding for financial stability, and realise intended impacts.
- The mandatory criterion of including HEIs from at least three EU countries enabled the inclusion of all European regions. The criterion effectively addresses the importance of fair participation, ensures the geographical balance, and makes the EUI an important instrument for European integration.

The main results of our assessment of the main *benefits and challenges of current alliances* are:

- It is too early to assess the impact of the EUI at the level of national higher education systems and of the EEA. Early experiences indicate that EUAs strive to further European cohesion, increase social engagement, and respond to labour market needs.
- HEIs within EUAs perceive participation as an opportunity to innovate education, increase the attractiveness and quality of their educational offers, and improve transnational collaboration. Activities foster mutual learning, sharing best practices and experiencing new educational approaches.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has forced EUAs to develop new forms of blended mobility. These new forms are more inclusive, fit better to regular programmes and thus attract a larger student population.
- The current model of operation of the alliances is 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.
- The alliances face serious obstacles in realising 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 barriers.

To assess the *future development* of the EUI, we 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 teaching. For each driving force, we developed a scenario of the future development of the EUI. Scenarios were assessed by an expert panel. The main results of the scenarios exercise are:

- The number of alliances will likely grow. If that happens, the EC should consider further specifying how the EUI shapes the EEA.
- The current disjointed approach to addressing regulatory issues threatens to result in piecemeal, suboptimal solutions that still generate high transaction costs.
- If the EUAs consolidate they could function as innovation spaces and testing grounds in higher education, as well as a proper organisational form to offer flexible and student-centred learning. However, experts fear that the current formations are too complex, take too long to consolidate, and are too focused on other policy aims to serve as a role model.
- For EUAs to realise impacts beyond higher education, connections between the EEA, the ERA and other EU policies need to be strengthened.
- The EUI will likely further integrate higher education in the EEA. Experts indicated that it also holds broader opportunities for international collaboration beyond the EU.

Based upon these results we recommend the EP, in its dialogue with the EC, to:

- assess the opportunities to improve the financial position of EUAs;
- urge the EC to coordinate better the development of the regulatory framework for EUAs;
- reconsider the long list of selection criteria and expected impacts;
- emphasise the need to maintain benefits and monitor progress.

The in-depth analysis of the HEIs involved in EUAs used data from three European higher education databases. The process also included reviews of relevant scholarly literature, three focus groups assessing the experiences of the EUAs, and a workshop that discussed scenarios on development paths for European higher education, the EUI, and EUAs. Due to data protection rules, data was only available on selected EUAs and their members, not on HEIs that applied but were not selected.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3XF2KUX>

More information on Policy Department research for CULT: <https://research4committees.blog/cult/>



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