

New European Universities and the old challenges

On the 9th of July the European Commission has announced the 24 new European Universities that are added to the other 17 alliances selected in 2019. ESU welcomes the newly selected universities and reaffirms its commitment to be actively involved in representing the rights and stance of European students in shaping, developing and utilizing the European Universities Initiative that in total involve [280 higher education institutions backed up by € 287 million from the EU budget](#).

This initiative has become a very frequently discussed topic on the European level, and is often brought forward by the European Commission. We see many expectations tied to the future of the university alliances. It is good to see that both the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 budgets support the projects to increase synergy between the European Education Area and the European Research Area. ESU supports this development, but wants to underline that the Erasmus+ budget must not prioritise funding for the European Universities over the other initiatives in the European Education Area, such as mobilities, partnerships and other types of cooperation among the rest of the universities¹ on the European continent - within and beyond the EU. Synergies between the European Education Area and the European Research Area should be promoted also beyond the European Universities Initiative.

Some key issues for European Universities propounded on the European level discussions concern the idea of a European Degree, a European approach to quality assurance for deep transnational cooperation and inter-university campuses.

One of the key cooperation principles of alliances indicates that [students can design their own flexible curricula, leading to a European Degree](#). ESU here sees a lack of common understanding to what is a European Degree. It is important to note that with the European Degree we shouldn't aim to create a new degree structure. A European degree as such shall be offered by any institution within the European Higher Education Area. The degree issued by European Universities shall not be legally different to those that can be awarded outside of a European University Alliance. It is fair to say that all the degrees awarded within the EHEA are 'European degrees'.

For the joint degrees issued within a European university, we want to reiterate² that students of an alliance should be able to obtain a degree from any of the involved universities under the same rules and conditions, with the same application and admission procedures and with no differences in recognition of their diploma given by the universities within the alliance. Such a joint degree can, for example, be offered under a certain label ensuring that a comprehensive approach for quality assurance is well applied for accrediting those.

¹ According to the uniRank database in 2020 there are currently 2,725 officially recognized higher-education institutions in Europe.

<https://www.4icu.org/Europe/#~:text=European%20Universities%20World%20Representation,higher%20Deduction%20institutions%20in%20Europe>.

² More in ESU's previous statement "European Universities: It Is About the Students", Dec 2019

<https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/European-Universities-It-Is-About-the-Students.pdf>

However, these degrees shall not become the only European Degrees offered across Europe.

The role of the quality assurance shall be ensuring the standards of the ESGs are accordingly met by the European Universities and the quality of study experiences is in place. We look forward to the outcomes of the EUniQ project³ to see a robust and student-centered approach of quality assurance for European Universities. We stress the need to involve students in quality assurance processes of alliances, they need to be part of setting it up and making it a purposeful process of quality enhancement across an alliance.

The European inter-university campuses should make it possible to have less bureaucratic and complicated physical mobility experiences both for staff and students. Physical mobility should be accessible to all students, and should not exclude certain groups. ESU supports the development of virtual exchange opportunities with a purpose of internationalization at home. However, students in Europe do need physical mobility that will be inclusive and easy to access as well as get recognised. Virtual learning should be developed with thorough pedagogical approaches and should be an addition to the learning experience. We reiterate the call to consider only physical mobility (whether complete or partial) as a condition to reach the goal of 50% mobile students.

Another key issue for the European discussions concerns the involvement of students within the European University alliances. Students are key stakeholders in the development process of the European University Alliances. In June 2020, in parallel with the leadership meeting of 17 alliances, ESU co-hosted a student meeting together with the ESN and DG EAC colleagues for around 80 student representatives from alliances. The meeting showcased that the level of student involvement highly differs per Alliance, and even per university. There is disparity in how alliances progress in ensuring student representation, challenges of communication flow, late engagement, transparency and accessibility of information persist. There is a responsibility for all of us - from the European to local levels for promoting meaningful student engagement within the European universities.

From the European level we expect incentives to university leaderships including surveys or other monitoring tools in order to bring reflections about the need of student engagement. On the other side, ESU is in regular cooperation with European stakeholders to ensure there is a good information flow among the student bodies as well as to secure the voice of local levels to be heard in European foras.

On the local levels we call upon the institutions to not involve the students only as a box ticking exercise but truly establish cooperation with them, ask where and how they would be eager to get involved, ensure diversity of representation by letting students elect their representatives, directly or indirectly through student representatives, and letting them be initiative takers in developing the European Universities.

³ More about the project: <https://www.nvao.net/en/euniq-project>



European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Advocating for democratic involvement of students in the Alliances is ESU's priority, we want to see democratically elected student bodies with representatives from all the different universities and we want to see them involved in decision making within the alliances.

We as ESU are committed to assist the Alliances to ensure sustainable, democratic, student engagement over the coming years. As our responsibility, we work closely with our member national unions to inform, train, and bring together the students involved in the European Alliances. Our vision for the European Universities is student-centered where cooperation and co-creation with students is fully embraced and acted upon across the different levels of decision making.

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The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 46 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.