Informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Higher education, Research and Innovation

25 January 2022

Cité des sciences et de l'industrie, Paris

Background document – Afternoon session

Strengthening transnational cooperation between universities for the future of Europe – Ministerial debate

As interfaces between the academic sector, the economic world, public authorities and civil society, at the crossroads of research, innovation and higher education, Europe's universities are key players in mobilising the Union's strengths to tackle today's challenges and prepare the Europe of tomorrow.

They are a central component of the European model and play a key role in the economic recovery of the Union. As learning places, they help to adapt to the transformation of the labour market by opening up to all types of learners and promoting their employability. As research and innovation places, they generate new knowledge and skills to accelerate the climate and digital transitions, improve the EU's competitiveness and strengthen its resilience to potential future crises.

As providers of high-quality education, they play an active role in promoting attractive and sustainable academic careers, vectors of research excellence. In this respect, they reflect Europe's attractiveness and contribute to its leadership on the international scene.

Finally, by enabling students to benefit from international experience during their studies and by preparing them for active citizenship, they play an active role in strengthening the sense of belonging and the affirmation of democratic values.

Universities are at the heart of the knowledge square (education, research, innovation and service to society). In synergy with the European Higher Education Area, they contribute both to the realisation of the European Education Area and to the deepening of the European Research and Innovation Area, as reflected in the ERA 2022-2024 policy agenda annexed to the Council conclusions on the future governance of the European Research Area adopted in November 2021.

However, universities face their own challenges, some of which have been accentuated by the pandemic we are facing since 2020. In order to address these challenges, the European Council called, back in December 2017, for "strengthening strategic partnerships between higher education institutions across the EU and encouraging the emergence, by 2024, of some 20 'European Universities', i.e. networks of universities at EU level based on a 'bottom-up' approach, which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and which will contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities".

The success of the two calls for proposals launched in 2018 and 2019 by the European Commission demonstrates the willingness of Europe's higher education institutions to go beyond existing cooperation models: 41 European Universities bring together more than 280 institutions across Europe representing 20% of Europe's students and acting with more than 1,000 associated partners.

The creation of these alliances has helped to develop ambitious approaches to teaching, mobility, joint programmes and cooperation in research and innovation, making a significant contribution to the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Union. They are a concrete expression of the synergies between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. By achieving an unprecedented degree of cooperation at all levels of organisation and in all areas of activity, these alliances are intended to be a major vehicle for excellence in European research and for the quality of European higher education, as well as for strengthening links with many other actors: research organisations, companies, civil society, regions, etc.

The transformations in progress concern the strengthening of the scientific capacity of universities, the dynamisation of innovation ecosystems, the development of a multidisciplinary approach to challenges such as climate change or health, the development of more flexible lifelong learning pathways, the promotion of fundamental values and international projection.

This dynamic is both fertile and inspiring for the entire European higher education sector. However, the 41 alliances supported under the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes face many obstacles that need to be tackled in order to secure their progress and reach their full potential, e.g. to award European degrees, to jointly recruit researchers and professors, to create laboratories with an international reputation.

The European Commission is proposing a European Strategy for Universities and a Council recommendation which aim to create an environment conducive to the transformation of the higher education sector for the future of Europe. Using European Universities as a model of good practice, the strategy will aim to improve the quality, international competitiveness and attractiveness of the European higher education sector.

Questions for the exchange of views:

Question 1

One of the priorities for the future of European universities is to strengthen transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe, building on the experience of European University Alliances and other forms of cooperation.

What do you see as the main challenges in strengthening the transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe and how can the Member States and the Commission coordinate to support universities in implementing the strategy? How can the strengthening of this transnational cooperation contribute to enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European higher education sector at international level?

Question 2

The attractiveness of universities depends in particular on the attractiveness of academic careers, covering teaching and research.

What policies can Member States and the Commission put in place to increase the attractiveness of these careers and attract more talent to the EU? What role can alliances such as the European Universities play in supporting these policies?

Question 3

To be successful and deliver on its expected positive impact, the European Universities Strategy and the proposal for a Council Recommendation require an

alignment of key policy priorities in the higher education sector and associated investments at European, national, regional and institutions' level.

How can the EU and Member States best coordinate their efforts?

European University Alliances are consolidating their models, but face obstacles related to the diversity of national systems and the plurality of funding sources available at European and national levels.

How can the EU and Member States contribute to the structuring of alliances? What steps are needed to achieve an integrated funding system between European, national and regional funds?