

SPHERE seminar

European university alliances as models for transnational cooperation and means for policy reform

18-19 November 2024

Online

Background note

The present background documents provides some further details on European Universities Initiative (EUI). You are strongly encouraged to read it, as it will help you at understand the presentations and actively contribute to the discussions of the seminar.

What is the EUI about?

In 2019, the European Commission launched the EUI to enhance transnational collaboration among universities through larger alliances. These alliances are promoting innovative, integrated higher education across Europe, aiming to boost student and staff mobility, joint degree programs, and collaborative research projects. Funded under the Erasmus+ program and supplemented by Horizon Europe, the EUI are a key strategy in achieving the European Education Area and plays a significant role in the European Strategy for Universities and the Higher Education Package.

The EUI is theme-wise quite open, and the different alliances that are funded by it have their own specific profiles and goals. For example, some focus strongly on access and inclusion, others emphasise sustainability and greening or bring together universities from coastal cities. But they all explore closer inter-institutional collaboration, including the joint provision of education for students. This is stressed by the alliances' commitment to make 50% of their students mobile, which is quite an ambitious, but not further defined condition. Related to this, the European Commission has put a strong emphasis on joint programmes and joint degrees, with the goal also of easing the provision of such programmes by eliminating institutional and national obstacles and establishing a “European Degree”. But alliances also engage in other ways of enhancing student and staff exchanges, building cross-institutional communities, including through virtual means and joint events and projects.

Who is eligible

Eligible (full partners) were under the most recent 2024 project call:

1. HEI in Erasmus+ programme countries, which are
 - a. European Union Member States (MS)
 - b. E+ associated countries (i.e. with a valid association agreement at the time of the grant signature)
2. HEI in non-associated Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo)

Eligibility conditions - Who can apply?

TYPE OF INSTITUTION

- **Higher Education Institutions** holding a valid **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)** and any entities affiliated to them
- **Any other organisation consisting of the above referred higher education institutions** - specifically set up with the purpose of implementing deep institutional transnational cooperation, including joint educational activities.

COUNTRY

They have to be established in one of the **eligible countries**, i.e.:

- **EU Member States** (including overseas countries and territories (OCTs)).*
- **Third countries associated to Erasmus+** and countries which are in **ongoing negotiations** for an association agreement to Erasmus+ and where that agreement enters into force before the grant signature.
- **Western Balkans third countries not associated to the programme** (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo)



* Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506 on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary.



Specific eligibility conditions for Western Balkans

HEIs from Western Balkans not associated to the Erasmus+ programme: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* and Montenegro**, can now become **full partners** in an alliance

HEIs from Western Balkan countries associated to the Erasmus+ Programme - i.e. **Republic of North-Macedonia and Serbia** - were already eligible to become **full partners**

Eligibility requirement for full partners:

ALL HEIs must be holders of a **valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)**, also those from the Western Balkans not associated to the Erasmus+ programme

ECHE call is currently open, with a cut-off on 25 January 2024



* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence



Associated partners (who cannot benefit from the funding, but join some of the actions, on their own expense:

- HEI in EU MS and associated countries
- HEI in all EHEA countries and in Kosovo
- Public and private organisations in EU MS and associated countries, active in education and training, research and innovation, or world of work

Consortia should consist of at least 3 fully eligible higher education institutions, but the goal is to establish much larger consortia. Commonly, alliances comprise around eight partners, and in addition some associations

State of play 2023/4

In **2024**, the initiative encompassed **64 alliances involving over 500 higher education institutions from 35 countries**, including all EU Member States, as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, the Republic of North-Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Türkiye. With this, it has fulfilled a goal of the the European Strategy for Universities (2022 – see further below).

In addition, these alliances involve a total of almost **2200 associated partners**, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, such as civil society organisations, enterprises, cities, local and regional authorities. Through association, they also involve higher education from third countries.

Important to understand, the programme changed over time. For example, while under the **first call in Nov. 2019**, alliances received initially **EUR 5 million** over a period of four years,

under the **most recent call in 2024**, each alliance can receive up to EUR 14.4 million for the same period.

For more detailed information

- [European Universities Factsheet \(2024\)](#)
- [European Universities Initiative Official Video \(2020\)](#)
- [European Universities alliances and their partners \(2024\)](#)

How to apply?

There is no further call planned for 2025. There might be [a 2026 and/or 2027 call](#), providing 2 years of funding primarily for already existing consortia. But it is expected that the EUI will continue under the next Erasmus+ programme, starting from 2028.

European Strategy for Universities

Launched in 2022, the European Commission's [European Strategy for Universities](#) aims at supporting and enabling universities to adapt to changing conditions, to thrive and to contribute to Europe's resilience and recovery. According to this strategy, by mid-2024, the Commission proposes to focus on achieving the four joint key objectives:

- Strengthening the European dimension in higher education and research.
- Supporting universities as lighthouses of our European way of life.
- Empowering universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions.
- Reinforcing universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership.

This strategy reiterates its commitment to the concrete actions to be achieved as part of the European Education Area, and places them as elements for a new framework for enhancing

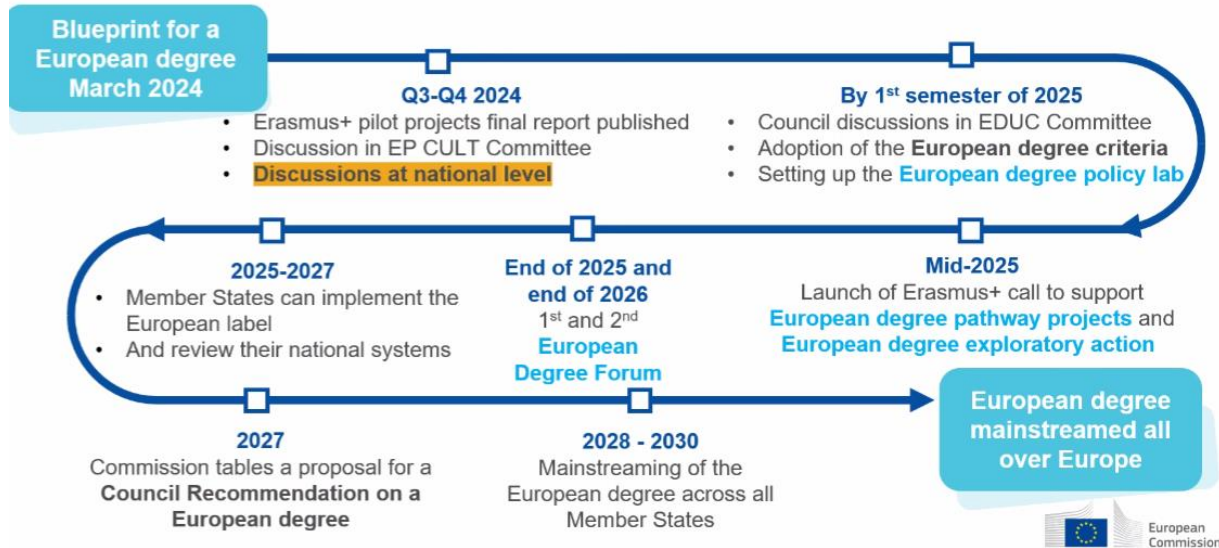
European cooperation. Embedded within this framework are several key flagship initiatives, including but not limited to, the expansion of the European Universities Initiative, aiming at

- establishing at least **60 European Universities alliances**, representing more than **500 universities, by mid-2024**. As mentioned above, this goal has been reached under the most recent, 5th call.
- the creation of a **legal statute for alliances of higher education institutions**, and the creation of the **Joint European Degree**. Both initiatives are still under development, and their exact nature and features are still to be agreed.

Joint European Degree

One of the main flagship initiatives of the European Strategy for Universities is the joint European degree - a qualification to be delivered at national level, which would attest learning outcomes achieved as part of transnational cooperation among several institutions, such as European Universities alliances, and based on a common set of criteria. According to the European Strategy for Universities, the European degree should be easy to issue, store, share, verify and authenticate, and recognised across the EU. The first step towards achieving this is by developing European criteria for the award of a European Degree label. Such a label would be issued as a complementary certificate to the qualification of students graduating from joint programmes delivered in the context of transnational cooperation between several higher education institutions.

The road towards a possible European degree: illustration of possible next steps



For more detailed information [Blueprint for a European Degree \(2024\)](#)

European Higher Education Package (2024)

On 27 March 2024, the European Commission published [a new higher education package](#), comprising three important initiatives to advance transnational cooperation between higher education institutions. This package consists of:

- a Communication on a **blueprint for a European degree**, proposing a concrete cooperation path and outlining support measures for EU countries and their higher education systems towards its creation.
- a proposal for a Council recommendation to **simplify and improve quality assurance processes and automatic recognition of qualifications** in higher education.

- a proposal for a Council recommendation to **make academic careers more attractive and sustainable**, by, among others, creating a working environment that offers pioneering new joint transnational educational activities and ensuring that national higher education systems address the uneven recognition of the diverse roles staff take on in addition to research, such as the development of transnational education activities.

For more detailed information [Full implementation of existing tools central to success of European Commission's new higher education package \(2024\)](#)

European Education Area

The EUi and the European Higher Education package are part of the [European Education Area \(EEA\)](#), which the European Union is working towards in parallel to the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. Unlike the Bologna Process, the EEA is limited to EU member states and covers all different levels and sectors of education to support lifelong learning.

In September 2020, the European Commission published a Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025. It outlines the next steps in this process and covers six dimensions: quality of education and training, inclusion and gender equality, green and digital transitions, teachers and trainers, higher education and the geopolitical dimension. The Communication mentions concrete actions such as the European Universities Initiative; European graduate tracking, recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad; and a European approach for micro-credentials, which are considered as instrumental to implement the European Education Area. Other key actions related to higher education include the European exploring the feasibility of a European degree, a European statute for university alliances, supporting attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, and a strengthened European recognition and quality assurance system.

Information

- [Blueprint for a European Degree \(2024\)](#) - Proposes a “European Degree” to unify qualifications across the EU, supporting student mobility, cross-border collaboration, and global competitiveness.
- [European Universities Factsheet \(2024\)](#) - Overview of the *European Universities Initiative*, promoting alliances for cross-border learning, inter-university campuses, and flexible education.

To watch:

- [European Universities Initiative Official Video \(2020\)](#) - Introduces the initiative’s vision for cross-border university networks to promote collaboration and mobility.
- [European Universities alliances and their partners \(2024\)](#) – which provides a map with all the European university alliances and also their associated partners
- Views from the sector: [EUA Briefing: The European Universities Initiative and System-Level Reforms \(2022\)](#) Discusses the initiative’s role in system reforms, influencing policy and innovation in European higher education.
- [EUA Briefing: Governance Models of European University Alliances \(2021\)](#) - Examines governance models within university alliances, focusing on decision-making and resource sharing.
- [The European Universities Initiative: Delivering on the Wider Vision? 2023](#) - provides a differentiated reflection on the opportunities of the EUI.