European Universities: a Pathway for Technological Universities

Brian O'Neill
Technological University Dublin, brian.oneill@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijap

European Universities: A Pathway for Technological Universities

Brian O'Neill

Technological University Dublin

In September 2017, in a celebrated speech on the future of Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the idea that Europe should have at least twenty "European universities" of sufficient scale that would allow students to move between different institutions, experience other cultures and take classes in at least two different languages. Speaking in the Sorbonne to an audience of university presidents, diplomats and parliamentarians as well as students, he argued that culture and knowledge is what binds the European Union together and that European universities could uniquely help to "create a sense of belonging" that will be the "strongest cement for Europe". Countering the apparent fragmentation of European, Macron's vision is of revival of the values of multiculturalism and multilingualism wherein every young person should "travel the continent to learn other languages" and "unlearn their natural boorish ways". This Europe, he claimed, "which has lived through so many wars and conflicts: what holds it together is its culture". [1]

The proposal for European Universities was subsequently supported and adopted by European Member States as part of the Gothenburg Leaders' Agenda in 2017 and incorporated into the Erasmus+ Work Programme to 2021, itself the foundation for European cooperation in higher education. The initiative is a new departure in European policy making and is fundamentally both political and strategic in nature. Ostensibly, an initiative to strengthen the European Education Area (EEA) and designed to enhance Europe's global competitiveness, it is also an invitation to innovate and bring about a new kind of university experience to foster and underpin a European identity. Despite over thirty years of promoting intercultural awareness and student mobility under the Erasmus programme, higher education remains very nationally-specific: degrees and diplomas are the preserve of individual institutions within national accreditation frameworks and with limited recognition or incentive to the transnational or the European context.

---

[1] Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text / English version. http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html

1

To give effect to the vision, in 2019 the European Commission launched its first call under a pilot programme for alliances to propose European Universities, with a second round of proposals to be considered in 2020.   The 2019 call received a total of 54 applications, of which seventeen were selected as "European Universities" involving 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States. Provision for a further 24 such consortia is planned in the second pilot call to be evaluated in 2020.

On the basis of the first approved consortia, a number of different approaches are evident. The alliances in development for this programme are intended to create the European universities of the future, promoting European values and identity, and offering a step change in the quality and competitiveness of European higher education. New forms of cooperation and collaboration are envisaged along with enhanced real and virtual mobility for students and teachers. The programme supports the ultimate goal that students and staff would have two languages in addition to their own.

Successful groupings to date include a broad range of institutions from across the EU, from universities of applied sciences, technical universities and universities of fine arts to comprehensive and research-intensive universities. Some alliances are comprehensive and cover all disciplines; others are more discipline-specific, focusing for example on urban coastal sustainability, social sciences or global health. Each alliance is composed on average of seven higher education institutions from all parts of Europe, reflecting the distribution of the student population from across the continent. The pilot nature of the initiative is such that alliances are asked to test different models, recognising that there is a long journey towards harmonisation and integration of approaches and standards.

There is an obvious interest from within Irish higher education in the European universities initiative. Participation in the programme offers an important opportunity to promote and profile Irish higher education at the European level. In anticipation of a post-Brexit Europe, Ireland's position as an English-speaking, global technology hub serving a European digital single market of 500 million people will place its universities at the core of technologically-focussed higher education efforts to meet the skills gaps and needs of an expanding ICT sector. The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD, noted in 2017 that the establishment of European universities represents a highly significant opportunity for Ireland as it develops the new technological university sector. He expressed his view that establishing a new university "as

2

our branch of a European university would make sense", and signalled his support for the concept.[2]

To date, two Irish universities have been successful in forming part of the first European universities alliance. Trinity College is a member of the CHARM-EU consortium and Dublin City University is a member of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities. The government has since announced that it would support further collaborations and innovative practices with a fund of up to €500,000 to assist with the costs of preparing for participation in these networks.

As a newly established technological university, TU Dublin has also signalled its interest in participating, both from the point of view of enhancing the visibility of the specific mission of the new technological-university sector in Ireland and joining the family of like-minded institutions on a Europe-wide basis. As an early supporter of the concept, TU Dublin is keen to support the concept of a European Technology University that can extend the potential to collaborate, promote research and partner with industry across borders, across languages and across disciplines.

As noted by Minister for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor T.D., the European universities initiative comes at a time when the importance of forging alliances with European partner institutions cannot be overstated, and where participation in the initiative will strengthen their offering, enhance the student experience, and prepare graduates for their future as European citizens in a global world. The vision is both consistent with the role of the technological university as developed within the Irish context and vital in terms of its future orientation as both locally and globally connected, creating pathways and opportunities for its wide constituencies.

---

[2] https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/varadkar-wants-irish-college-to-be-part-of-european-university-1.3297534

3