# Assessing the potential of the European Universities Initiative

*The European Universities Initiative is a new framework for collaboration between universities in the European Union.* **Andrew Gunn** *reflects on the first few years of the initiative and assesses how it might help shape the future of European higher education.*

The idea of a European University is as old as Europe's political union itself. A supranational university was first mooted in 1948, and various proposals were discussed amongst the founding members in the early years of the European Community. However, none of these proposals came to fruition, owing to a lack of consensus amongst member states over what form it should take.

These discussions identify what would be an enduring fault line running through the European political project: is it about economics and trade or culture and social solidarity, or both? And where does higher education fit into both of these differing rationales?

## The European Universities Initiative

In the late 1960s, European leaders agreed to fund the European University Institute, Florence, the postgraduate and post-doctoral institute in the social sciences which opened in 1972. However, this small, specialist institute wasn't the supranational university featuring the full range of subjects many had envisaged. For some, the European University remained an unfulfilled ambition.

The issue would return to European politics following the election of Emmanuel Macron as French President in May 2017. Macron's vision for an overhaul of the European Union featured resurrecting the idea of a European University. In September 2017 the President made a speech at the Sorbonne University where he set out his vision for a "fair, protective and ambitious Europe" underpinned by greater convergence and solidarity.

Macron stated "the strongest cement that binds the European Union together will always be culture and knowledge". He argued that the many languages of Europe should be made an asset, so that Europe is a place where all students can speak at least two European languages by 2024, and that instead of lamenting the divisions between nations, exchanges between them should be increased.

To realise this vision, Macron believed it was time to create "European Universities—a network of universities across Europe" that will "be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence." This agenda was then taken up by the European Commission, and it moved quickly through the EU institutions. In 2018 the main objectives for the new European Universities Initiative (EUI) were set as: first, promoting common European values and strengthened European identity through collaboration, and second, delivering a "substantial leap in quality, performance, attractiveness and international competitiveness of European universities".

## A 'network of networks'

Two rounds of calls, in 2019 and 2020, invited existing European universities to collaborate and produce proposals for networks to be funded by the initiative. The EUI is an innovative model of collaboration as it is a 'network of networks' – multiple unique alliances developed using a bottom-up approach, which are all members of a larger strategic scheme.

This means the EUI didn't produce one network but 41 different networks involving 284 higher education institutions, each of which has five to nine members united by an overarching theme. Each network may also have associate partners in addition to full members enabling wider collaboration. These can be a wide range of organisations including NGOs, businesses and government agencies.

A network may be themed around a subject area, such as the *Alliance for Common Fine Arts Curriculum—EU4ART*. However, the design of the selection criteria meant a wide range of unifying themes can be seen amongst the selected alliances. For example, *The European University of the Seas* is an alliance of six universities in coastal locations who are committed to more effective ocean governance and delivering the Sustainable Development Goals for the ocean, while the *European University for WellBeing* seeks to make a measurable impact on European citizens' quality of life.

Some of the alliances are new, developed specifically for the funding call such as the European University of Post-Industrial Cities, while others, such as Athena and Aurora, are existing networks that sought EUI funding. Each network receives up to €5 million from Erasmus+ to support a range of activities. These include student and staff mobility, developing joint programmes, common infrastructure and shared governance and removing barriers to credit recognition. In 2020 it was announced each network would also receive up to €2 million of Horizon research funding under the "science with and for society" chapter. This has bolstered research within the networks, which were initially more teaching mission orientated.

Although this additional funding has been welcomed, when compared to the money being spent on innovations in higher education in China and the US, the EUI is operating on relatively small sums which are spread quite widely. Because of this, networks may need to seek out additional funding sources. This could open up a role for member states.

**Can the EUI succeed?**

A prominent theme of EUI networks is the use of challenge-based education – a fashionable framework where learning is applied to solving real-world challenges – "where students, academics and external partners can cooperate in interdisciplinary teams to tackle the biggest issues facing Europe today." In fact, the European Consortium of Innovative Universities made challenge-based education the theme of their whole network.

One highly serendipitous feature of the EUI proposals was the use of virtual mobility, long before pandemic lockdowns were a thing. For example, the *UNITE! University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering* has as one of its five deliverables the creation of a "Virtual Campus that includes a platform for digital mobility, virtual spaces and online tools". The EUI calls placed great importance on 'embedded mobility' where at "least 50% of the students within the alliance should benefit from such mobility, be it physical, virtual or blended", and this is reflected in the operations of the new networks.

Some alliances funded in the first round have since expanded to incorporate new members. For example in June 2020 the LSE was upgraded from 'associate partner' to 'full member' of CIVICA – The European University of Social Sciences. The LSE now sits alongside seven partners as a full member.

As the UK hadn't yet fully departed the EU when the EUI was being rolled out, UK universities were eligible to join network bids; an opportunity denied to Swiss universities who wanted to be involved. This resulted in UK universities being members of seven networks.

The UK is now a third country and the Brexit settlement for higher education looks a little incoherent. UK universities in EUI networks now participate from outside the EU in a scheme designed to strengthen the social solidarity of the regional bloc – the same bloc UK voters choose to leave.

The politics of this might be a little odd, but for universities this situation is perfectly feasible. Modern universities are adept at managing the membership of multiple collaborations and exchanges with differing rationales at any one time. Moreover, having one UK member in several networks is highly unlikely to derail the wider purpose of the EU's project.

The fact the EUI is now drawing on both Erasmus+ and Horizon funding streams – the UK remains in the latter, but not the former – gives the UK a small stake in the scheme and may provide some security for UK universities in the initiative. It is too early to tell if the networks will deliver the intended results. But more will be known in May, following the mid-term evaluation of the first round, when the EU will report on the next steps of the EUI.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Lars Kruse / AU Foto](#)*