



## POSITION PAPER

# COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON BUILDING BRIDGES FOR EFFECTIVE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION COOPERATION

## IMPLEMENTING THE EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR UNIVERSITIES

swissuniversities



Danske Professionshøjskoler





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## **POSITION PAPER on the Council Recommendation on Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation – Implementing the European Strategy for Universities**

### **Executive Summary**

- UAS4EUROPE welcomes the European Strategy for Universities and the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation as a step towards the creation of a European Knowledge Area.
- The implementation of the Council Recommendation requires the coverage of the entire higher education sector, not only university alliances funded within the European Universities Initiative instrument.
- Different regulatory frameworks in the Member States must be considered and addressed in the discussions of a legal status for university alliances and joint European degree labels.
- The creation of a European Knowledge Area requires the inclusion of research, education and innovation.



## Introduction

UAS4EUROPE welcomes the [Council Recommendation](#) on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation as adopted on 5 April 2022.

Creating strong links between the European Education Area and the European Research Area are imperative to set the right framework conditions for higher education institutions to exploit their full potential. The current higher education system is constructed in a way that it can lead to incremental changes at best, while we need nothing less than a revolution to tackle all-encompassing challenges such as climate change.

The European Green Deal must be understood as a socio-economic challenge that sets a short time period to deliver on decarbonisation processes that will quickly and profoundly shape our economies and societies. Researchers and scientific actors know that the green transition cannot be achieved in single Member States, institutions or sectors but require the highest degree of transdisciplinary, inter-institutional and cross-national collaboration. Most of all, the success of the Green Deal will depend on technological development and scientific excellence.

While the Communications on the [European Education Area](#) and the [European Research Area](#) already made good steps in the fields of education and research, these two dimensions need to be seen as one side of the same coin. In our [Position Paper on the new ERA](#), we already called for deepened and effective synergies not only of funding sources but also of policies. Hence, the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation is an important step in the creation of a European Knowledge Area.

## Coverage of the entire higher education sector

At the basis of the Council Recommendation are the following flagship initiatives as outlined in the European Strategy for Universities:

- Increase the number of European University alliances to 60 by mid-2024, covering over 500 higher education institutions;
- Creation of a legal statute for university alliances;
- Creation of a joint European degree; and
- Generalising the use of the European Student Card initiative.

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) has proven to be an effective instrument for “strengthening strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions” ([European Council Conclusions](#), 14 December 2017, p. 3). It seems therefore logical to use these alliances as test beds for new initiatives as proposed by the European Commission.

However, this raises the concern that this test bed-dynamic leads to a higher education system of two speeds in which European Universities Initiative alliances advance faster than higher education institutions that are not part of them through the specific focus on these



alliances. This might lead to divisions among higher education institutions that are part of these alliances and those that are not. The proportionate inclusion of all types of higher education institutions in the European Universities Initiative, including universities of applied sciences, is imperative to ensure that transnational skills development and knowledge production benefits our societies in their entirety. While significant progress has been made on the representation of UAS in the EUI in the second call (2020)<sup>1</sup>, UAS remain underrepresented compared to traditional universities.

In sum, while EUI alliances are a good instrument in identifying shortfalls in transnational cooperation potential, the implementation of an effective higher education cooperation should include the entire sector with all its actors, not just a “coalition of the able”.

Finally, EUI alliances should not be overburdened with new initiatives on a European level, which also runs the risk of undermining the institutional autonomy of both the alliance and the higher education institutions that are part of them. In this context, we appreciate that the protection of institutional autonomy as the core principle of academic freedom is mentioned several times in the Council Recommendation.

### Consider different regulatory frameworks

A **legal statute** for university alliances seems like a good tool for sharing common financial, human or digital resources for inter-operability of different higher education institutions. However, excellence is not driven by a legal statute. What is important is to take into account the different regulatory frameworks in Member States that partly inhibit inter-operability of alliances to a larger extent than their legal status. As for UAS for instance, Danish University Colleges cannot issue master degrees, while German and Portuguese UAS, after years of debates and negotiations, start accrediting PhD programmes. UAS in other European countries, such as in Austria, continue to strive for accredited PhD study programmes.

The implementation phase of the Council Recommendation requires careful consideration of the different regulatory frameworks. As different higher education institutions in different Member States operate under differing regulatory frameworks, further clarification is needed regarding the implementation of **joint European degrees** given that accreditation remains a national competence. If a joint degree comes in the form of a European label, as proposed in the Council Recommendation, its added-value and administrative burden have to be further clarified.

The Council Recommendation and our Position Paper outline that in order to achieve a more effective transnational higher education cooperation, reforms on both national and regional levels are needed. If regulatory frameworks are being aligned in the fields of education and

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. E3UDRES2, RUN-EU, ULYSSEUS



research, transnational higher education cooperation will benefit all European higher education institutions and thus all European citizens.

### **Creating a European Knowledge Area**

UAS4EUROPE appreciates the efforts made by the European Commission in streamlining the European Research Area and European Education Area in their European Strategy for Universities. We also welcome the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation and its focus on all types of higher education institutions. This aspect ensures a strong inclusivity of the entire higher education sector, from traditional universities to universities of applied sciences.

If implemented with care, this Council Recommendation can also play a significant part in achieving the European Green Deal. Through their close partnerships with industry, SMEs and public sector actors in their regions that include the students from the earliest stages of their curricula, UAS constitute strong actors in the entire knowledge chain from education to research, knowledge valorisation and innovation. Therefore, we call on the European Commission and the Member States to help us create a European Knowledge Area that covers the European Research Area and the European Education Area, but also the European Innovation Area/Agenda.



## UAS4EUROPE - Who we are

UAS4EUROPE is an informal network (founded 2016) representing more than 450 Universities of Applied Sciences from 24 European countries. The network aims to strengthen the voice of Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Europe in the field of applied research and innovation. UAS4EUROPE is a networking platform for exchanging knowledge and for reaching out to European Institutions and other R&I stakeholders to ensure a better integration and visibility of UAS in Europe's research and innovation policies and programmes.

More about UAS4EUROPE: [www.uas4europe.eu](http://www.uas4europe.eu)  
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