

Universities Finland Unifi's Comments on European University Initiative

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on EUA's statement on the future of European Universities Initiative. We kindly ask you to take into consideration the following aspects.

1. The European Universities Initiative must be seen as a means among others to explore strategic cooperation and identify challenges and obstacles

EUA calls on governments and policy makers responsible for higher education and research to work together to address and eventually remove remaining obstacles and work towards greater compatibility of systems across Europe.

EUA's survey results demonstrate quite remarkable variation on how the purpose of the initiative has been interpreted. Continued unification of the European Higher Education Sector is needed in terms of educational programmes and research careers to ensure mobility, attract top talent and strengthen Europe's competitiveness. To achieve this, collaboration between universities alone is not sufficient if the legal constraints and policy frameworks are incompatible.

The European Universities initiative is anyhow an important step towards further unification. European Universities, by focusing on institutional transformation through deep collaboration, play an important role in not only identifying existing barriers but also in coming up with innovative solutions. In addressing remaining barriers and seeking solutions, the governments and policy makers should work closely with the European University alliances to learn from the evidence generated during the pilot period. Results from the pilot should contribute to EU level policy recommendations and the development of possible instruments for the transformation of universities.

2. The diverse ways of collaborating must be preserved

EUA calls for future EU funding programmes to preserve and enhance the diversity of collaboration models among higher education institutions.

While the unification of the legal and regulatory framework across Europe is important, it is equally important that this framework allows for a diversity of collaborations and that there are adequate funding opportunities in their support. Given the heterogeneity of universities, and differences as to the level of importance they attach to their different functions e.g. teaching, research and innovation, and societal engagement. they will need sufficient flexibility to collaborate and wider opportunities to access EU funding programmes in addition to Erasmus+ and the framework programme.

3. The initiative must encompass all university missions in a bottom-up approach

EUA calls for joint calls for the European Universities Initiative under the next generation of EU funding programmes (2021-2027) encompassing all missions.

It should be noted that Unifi members situate themselves differently to this question. Their opinions on using research funding for European Universities Initiative are diverse. The opinion reflect how different European Universities choose to weight and combine research and education in their strategies.

4. Fostering cohesion must be a key objective

EUA calls for national and regional governments and other relevant actors to use the enabling conditions and thematic concentration of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) towards research, education and innovation.

We recognize the importance of narrowing Europe's innovation gap. However, the role of European Universities Initiative in this aspect should be considered carefully. The main objective of the alliances is to increase the competitiveness of the European higher education by facilitating collaboration based on excellent research. Different EU programmes must be coherent and work in synergy in order to maximise efficiency and impact on society and economy at large and to contribute better to competitiveness.

5. Geographical scope

Universities Finland Unifi maintains that excellence must continue to be the primary principle across all European University Alliances. Quality and global excellence must be the criteria for which the funding needs to be allocated.

6. Long-term sustainability requires continued political and financial support

It is important that a thorough evaluation takes place after the three-year pilot phase with the broad involvement of stakeholders, including the alliances themselves, as well as higher education institutions and sector representatives outside the alliances, in order to adjust further where needed.

The existing European Universities will require substantial financial support in the future to ensure their sustainability. It should also be noted that while three years may be sufficient to design and implement innovative education tools, there should be another 3-4 years of funding for testing, improving and scaling the pilot programmes. It is unlikely that three years from now, the Alliance activities would be so integrated into all university activities that they can be carried out to the desired extent without external funding. Therefore, the continuation of funding after the pilot period is one of the critical issues for the implementation of the key elements of cooperation.