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ETUCE Position on the

European Universities Initiative and European Degrees

Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 15-16 November 2021

Background

On 17 May 2021, the Education Council of the European Union adopted the Council conclusions on the [European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education](#). Proposed by the European Commission in [December 2017](#) and within [the European Education Area](#), the European University initiative project grant encourages universities to establish alliances to set up joint degree programmes.

After two Erasmus+ calls for proposals, [first](#) and [second](#), complemented by the support of [Horizon 2020](#) support, 41 'European Universities' alliances have been established as pilot by the involvement of more than 280 higher education institutions, covering 5% of all higher education institutions across Europe, and with the potential to involve 20% of European students.

The Council conclusions sets up priorities to be achieved by the European Universities initiative. These priority areas are:

- At least 50% of the students within the European University alliances should benefit from physical, virtual or blended mobility;
- Establishing joint European degrees within the European University alliances;
- Developing European inter-university campuses within the European University alliances;
- Developing innovation, effective and inclusive learning, teaching, open science and open education practices;
- Setting up an ad-hoc expert group composed of experts from the Member States to monitor progress, discuss and tackle existing barriers to cooperation;
- Enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession, including the well-being of teachers and the attractiveness of the teaching profession;
- Reinforcing European higher education, for which the Council calls for deeper cooperation, and more synergies with the European Research Area (ERA) and the Bologna Process;

The following position represents the views of ETUCE and its member organisations regarding this initiative.

1. ETUCE welcomes that the Council recognises the national competence on higher education and institutional autonomy of the higher education institutions. We also welcome that the Council Conclusions invites the EU Members States to “defend and promote **academic freedom and institutional autonomy** as a central principle of well-functioning and quality higher education systems, in line with the [commitments made by Ministers](#) responsible for Higher Education of the EHEA and Ministers of Research”. We remind that these fundamental values were stipulated in the [Rome Communiqué](#), adopted by the ministries of the

European Higher Education Area at the Ministerial Conference 2020 of the Bologna Process. The [Annex I of the Rome Communiqué](#) defines academic freedom as “*an indispensable aspect of quality learning, teaching and research in higher education as well as of democracy*” and institutional autonomy as its constitutive element, and it underlines that “*Societies cannot be genuinely democratic without honouring academic freedom and institutional autonomy*”.

2. The European University alliances were set up voluntarily by universities to enhance their cooperation and to establish joint study programmes. We are concerned that the Council conclusions directly addresses the university alliances and asks them to develop the label “European University” and “European Degrees”. As the Council conclusions suggests to European University alliances to establish “**inter-university campuses**”, we are concerned that the autonomy of the institutions will be negatively affected, as well as the local institutional culture and traditions by sharing teachers, staff and researchers and using common and shared infrastructures, equipment, and facilities. We believe that this process will contribute to the **harmonisation** of the higher education systems. We urge the European Commission and the education ministers to respect the fundamental values of **academic freedom and institutional autonomy** of the universities which allied within European Universities networks.

3. Even though the Council conclusions announce that the European University Alliances should create “European Degrees” it is evident that the aims behind this idea are not clear. So far it has been discussed that the “European Degrees” could be either delivered by an EU-level body, or issued by different European University Alliances, or be a label only. At the same time, setting up an EU-level body to issue joint degrees would mean a strong harmonisation of higher education systems and we are against this idea. Jointly issued qualifications by the European Alliances which compose of on average 20 universities each need to respect national regulation in relation to qualification requirements to pursue professions. This means that the joint qualifications need to meet several countries’ qualification requirements and quality assurance procedures. This seems to be another attempt of the European Commission to harmonise qualifications and education systems which is clearly not in line with Art 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU). We have already raised our [concerns](#) that alliances should not be used to **harmonise education content**.

4. We remind that that Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) is not the only article of the Treaty which defines the European Union’s roles concerning the higher education sector. We point out that Article 7¹ defines that the “Union shall ensure consistency between its policies and activities, taking all its objectives into account and in accordance with the principle of conferral of powers”. In addition to this, Article 9² of the TFEU recognises that the development of “high level of education” goes hand in hand with the promotion of other important societal goals. We believe that such important societal goals cannot be reached with a harmonised structure of higher education systems. The EU needs different kinds of higher education systems and different kinds of higher education institutions that can adapt to different needs. Without such diversity, the Union’s higher education systems, universities and university graduates will not be internationally competitive. For these reasons, the European University Alliances should not aim at harmonising the national higher education systems.

¹ Article 7: The Union shall ensure consistency between its policies and activities, taking all of its objectives into account and in accordance with the principle of conferral of powers.

² Article 9: In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a **high level of education**, training and protection of human health.

5. We are deeply concerned that the Council suggested to the European University Alliances to open their alliance to non-academic partners and labour market actors. We remind that higher education institutions should be driven by academic freedom, integrity in the pursuit of truth, and the goal of continuous improvement towards higher scientific quality. Non-academic partners have their own interests and do not necessarily share these fundamental pillars of academic work. The goal of some non-academic actors is to turn higher education into a business producing basic skills for the labour market. We remind that the education system cannot be shaped around the skills needs of the labour market. **Education is a public good** and it should prepare students to life and jobs. This holistic view of education must be protected to allow students to acquire social skills and not only short-term labour market relevant knowledge. It is highly important to establish a strong balance within partnerships of **universities and businesses** and that such partnerships need to be led by the universities.

6. The concept behind the “**European Degrees**” is to strengthen automatic recognition, student-centred learning, mobility, internationalisation, quality assurance, etc., which are common goals of the Bologna Process. We underline that the common fundamental values and the aims of the Bologna Process need to be respected and fulfilled by each higher education institution in the EHEA and by the European Commission. By asking only the universities within the European University Alliances to ensure these aims by establishing the European Degrees, the European Commission is creating a divide among universities who are members of the alliances and those which are not. This attempt seriously weakens the requirements of the Bologna Process for those universities who are not part of the alliances.

7. ETUCE is concerned about the impact of setting up **joint accreditation and quality assurance procedures** by the European Alliances as these can have a negative impact on the institutional autonomy and national competence on education. Joint accreditation and quality assurance procedures for member universities of a European Alliance are likely to lead to the concentration of power to the management of each member university. Thus, this attempt can also weaken the governance of quality assurance systems wherein education trade unions are involved. The suggestion of the Council can have an impact on national quality assurance measures and regulations on accreditation procedures which is a national competence. It is important to note that there are different kinds of accreditation and quality assurance systems in practice currently. They can be national or international, public or private, they cover the whole institution or a study programme, and they can be voluntary or mandatory for institutions. Public and mandatory requirements differ in the Member States of the EU. The EU must fully respect the responsibility of the Member States for the organisation of education systems under Article 165(1) of the TFEU. In this regard, we stand for national and institutional quality assurance systems to be respected along the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#) and joint university programmes should also respect this.

8. ETUCE welcomes that the European Council recognises the importance of creating “more **attractive career and working conditions** for researchers and staff”. Academics across Europe face **decreasing job security**, due to budget constraints, reduced employment opportunities, an increasing proportion of staff in temporary, part-time or fixed-term positions, and an increasing proportion of staff in externally funded positions. Researchers, teachers and other staff indeed play a vital role in providing quality education in universities and their decent working conditions and salary should be ensured in all universities and not only in those which belong to the alliances. [The ETUCE call to the Rome Ministerial Meeting](#) underlined that academics on fixed-term contracts are in precarious employment situations which makes it harder for them to undertake high quality teaching and research. The COVID-19 crisis has also led to a deterioration in working

conditions, including massively increased workloads due to online and blended learning and job losses for fixed-term and casualised staff. These developments have had a disproportionate effect on particular groups of staff, such as women and ethnic minorities. The pandemic has also had a detrimental impact on the mental health and well-being of staff and students. We regret that the Council did not address these problems and that the Council Conclusions on the European Universities constitutes a major step back from recognising the **value of the teaching profession and the needs of the staff**.

9. ETUCE strongly supports calling the European University Alliances to respect the [European Charter for Researchers](#) and the [Code of Conduct for Recruitment of Researchers](#), and their implementation mechanisms, including the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) which aim to foster European research career development practices. ETUCE requests that the **European Commission monitors** with the effective involvement of the trade unions of academic staff how the European University Alliances respect these charters.

10. While the Council conclusions request the European University Alliances to ensure a “balanced mobility of staff with the alliances”, we are concerned that the **mobility of academics and researchers**, either in person or online, from one university to another can force them to work on temporary contracts and short-term contracts. This process can further increase **precariousness** in the sector and have a detrimental effect on the health and safety of the teachers and researchers. Temporary and short-term contracts can cause major financial insecurity which affects the working conditions of the staff and their **health and safety**³. The [OECD's report](#)⁴ on research precariousness shows that the impact of high mobility of researchers can lead to precariousness by holding fixed-term positions without permanent or continuous employment prospects. In this respect, staff mobility between universities of the European University Alliances need to respect the permanent contract, fair working conditions and salary of the staff. Fixed-term contracts (and working also under grants/scholarships) combined with mobility requirements can also have an effect on individual's social security, pensions, etc. Therefore, staff mobility should be conducted and promoted within permanent contracts. It is often that the organisation benefits from the mobility but all the risks connected to mobility fall down on the individual. The importance of guaranteeing fair working conditions and decent salaries was also clearly recognised in the [Rome Communiqué](#) and its [ANNEX III on Recommendations for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching](#), as well as the [Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future](#) (2020) adopted under the Croatian Presidency of the EU.

11. According to ETUCE member organisations representing staff in the higher education and research sector, it is necessary to **review research assessment**. ETUCE welcomes that the Council Conclusions calls on members states and universities to “increase excellence in research and quality in education” through a “reform of research assessment systems and careers”. We recognise the importance of assessing researchers' performance for their career development, as presented by this recent [OECD report](#). This report underlines that the methods of funding research organisations and researchers are moving towards competitive mechanisms, and diversification of funding sources and types of funding (e.g. blue sky or fundamental research vs. mission-led or applied research, funding for individual and team projects vs. funding for research organisations). Those who receive higher grades in the assessment have many publications, which were cited in many other papers, have publications in English and participated in mobility. Research assessment

³ SULF: [The shadow of uncertainty: external funding, precarious employment and work environment in higher education](#), 2021

⁴ OECD: Reducing the precarity of academic research careers, 2021

increasingly is based on journal-based metrics rather than the scientific content of research. According to the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA Principles\)](#), journal-based metrics must not be used as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an individual scientist's contributions, or in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions. ETUCE demands the assessment of research on the basis of its scientific content and the involvement of the trade unions of academics and researchers in improving the assessment methods of research which has direct impact on the researchers' contractual situation and working conditions.

12. Furthermore, ETUCE expresses its support for the Council's consideration of "protecting research findings and intellectual assets in conformity with the **open access and open data** principles at the EU level". ETUCE emphasises that open data and open access to education material and research must be oriented to improve the quality of higher education and research and ensure academic freedom of researchers and other academics. For this, it is essential that open data and open access to education material and research respect the copyright and other intellectual property rights of the academics and researchers. These are recognised as a fundamental element of academic freedom in paragraph 12 of the [1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel](#) and under Article 17 of the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#). In addition, the [Directive on Copyright in the digital single market](#) provides some measures to facilitate the work of researchers and academics. ETUCE calls on the Member States who are now responsible to implement the Directive to ensure cooperation and meaningful consultations with education social partners to fully respect the rights and professional needs of academics and researchers. In particular, education trade unions call on the Member States to develop national measures to encourage open publication of research results and teaching materials while protecting intellectual property of academics and researchers. The Member States should make it easier for researchers and other academics to choose the format and channels for the publication of their own research results and teaching materials. In addition, it is important to ensure that recruitment, career progression, and criteria of funding are based on scientific content rather than publication channels or journal-based metrics that do not value the quality of the research.

13. ETUCE urges the EU institutions and the Member States to develop adequate measures to ensure a balance between the **intellectual property rights of academics and researchers** and open access to knowledge. Indeed, researchers and academics are increasingly exposed to pressures regarding ownership over their research and educational materials with negative consequences on their creativity and professional status. In addition, ETUCE is concerned about the rapid expansion of the EdTech companies in the education sector. For example, EdTech companies may prefer to turn education into a standardised product and low-cost commodity that can be sold in large volumes in global markets. This threat has caused further challenges to the protection of the **teaching materials and teachers' intellectual property rights**, especially during the emergency and remote teaching within the COVID-19 crisis. In this respect, ETUCE underlines that open access should never be used to serve private interests and to undermine the public value and the quality of education. ETUCE also warns that the magnitude of these challenges can increase with the further development of digitalisation in education if the European Commission and the EU Member States allow it. In this respect, we regret that the intellectual property rights of academics and researchers are not sufficiently addressed in the Council conclusions on the European University alliances and other relevant initiatives at the EU level, such as the [Intellectual Property Action Plan](#).

14. We ask the European Commission and the Member States to strictly monitor **high quality education and inclusivity** of these European University Alliances in line with the implementation of the first principle of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. We note that the ambitions of the European Commission are high in

relation to the European University Alliances but since the projects have just started, it is impossible to evaluate their success. It is essential that the higher education systems are based on the values of diversity and inclusiveness and that attending joint programmes created by the Alliances are available to all students, higher education teachers and researchers. Diversity of the higher education systems of the Member States need to ensure that the multiple goals of the EU can be reached.

15. The Council conclusions ask the European Universities Alliances to reach the ambitious target that at least 50% of the students within the alliances benefit from mobility, be it physical, virtual or blended. We underline the importance of **safe physical mobility**. It is important to strengthen physical mobility to improve **European and democratic citizenship values** of the students, which is the original aim of the [Erasmus mobility](#). However, we remind that students coming from low-income backgrounds will not be able to afford participation in international mobility. Recently, the statistics showed that the majority of mobile students come from privileged socio-economic and academic family backgrounds.⁵ The insufficiency of Erasmus grants provided for studying abroad and the high costs of living in another country are mentioned by 63% of non-mobile students in 2016 as the main obstacles to participating in Erasmus exchange programmes.⁶ Limited financial support contributes to a larger gap between students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds and students from less privileged backgrounds. While physical mobility is important, other forms of mobility and international cooperation also need to be recognised and promoted in order to ensure equal opportunities for all. For example, virtual and blended mobility also support staff mobility by providing flexible means for mobility that can fit to different life and family situations (e.g. care responsibilities).

16. ETUCE expresses concern for the **sustainability** of the European Universities Alliances projects. The European Universities Alliances receive grants from the Erasmus Programme only for 4 years with the condition that they present long-term strategies and sustain themselves in the long run. We welcome that the Council encourages the Member States to ensure the sustainability of the European Universities Alliances. The high quality of university research and education requires sufficient and predictable long-term funding that respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Short-term funding does not create structures and activities that are sustainable in the long term. “The use of all available regional, national and EU funding mechanisms, including the new opportunities under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, European Structural and Investment Funds, Horizon Europe, and the InvestEU to support the European Universities initiative” indeed can be supportive to maintain the alliances.

17. Higher education is a **human right and public good** and it is essential to ensure sustainable public investment to higher education institutions including the public universities which are members of European University Alliances. Moreover, education is key in promoting common European values, fostering social integration and a sense of belonging to the community, enhancing intercultural understanding and preventing radicalisation. Therefore, we urge the European Commission and the ministers of education to take into account this aspect in relation to the European Universities Alliances. Despite the unprecedented move by the EU to mobilise additional resources through the [Recovery and Resilience Facility of the Next Generation EU](#), including in education, ETUCE recalls that it is the governments’ primary responsibility to increase funding and to design public education budgets in a manner that provides sufficient, predictable and sustainable resources even after the lifetime of the Recovery Plans and in a holistic, rather than fragmented and project-based, manner.

⁵ *The Erasmus Impact Study* (2014) stated that almost two thirds of students had at least one parent working as executive, professional or technician.

⁶ *What are the obstacles to student mobility during the decision and planning phase?* Intelligence brief No. 02 (2016). http://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EV_IB_mobility_obstacles.pdf

18. In recent years and also due to the COVID crisis, the reduction of core **public funding in higher education and research** has had a major impact on increasing the number of part-time and short-term contracts of higher education and research staff, multiplying inequalities and deteriorating working conditions. Budget cuts happened many times in line with policies requiring universities to fulfil labour market needs, shorten the curricula, introduce lifelong learning, and seek the necessary funding from companies. According to a European Commission report⁷, several countries recently adopted reforms which extend the possibilities for performance-related pay of academics, making this kind of remuneration possible in virtually all European higher education systems.

19. We are concerned that the European University Alliances will introduce and/or increase **tuition fees of the students** in order to maintain the alliance when EU funding is not guaranteed anymore. This is a real danger especially that the Council encourages the Member States to “find **co-funding mechanisms** for higher education institutions engaged in the European Universities initiative based on their basic and **performance-based funding** or specific funding programmes, or strategic funds”. ETUCE reminds the European Commission that quality higher education is not a **commodity** and should be accessible to all and the European University Alliances should not change to **private university consortiums**.

20. Performance-based funding usually contributes to further **privatisation and commercialisation** of higher education which is already in rise as a result of the COVID crisis. ETUCE is also concerned about the funding of universities based on the performance of the students in the labour market, and we do not agree to use the future [European Graduate Tracking Survey](#) for this purpose. The **graduates’ performance** in the labour market depends to a great extent on the availability of quality job offers by the companies and fair recruitment procedures, and good working conditions and salaries. The content of the curricula and funding of higher education institutions, in this case of the universities who are members of the European University alliances, therefore should not be decided by the graduates’ performance in the labour market.

21. The Council’s calls for the European Commission, Member States, the ‘European Universities’ and the ad-hoc expert group composed of experts from the Member States to cooperate, develop solutions and implement them. ETUCE expresses its wish and commitment to be part of the **ad-hoc expert group** of experts from the Member States as the European University Alliances will have major impact on higher education systems and the work of higher education staff. Thus, it is essential to include trade unions of academics into the governance structures. We also underline the importance of **regularly and jointly monitoring the state of play of the 41 alliances of the European Universities** and any additional ones together with the trade unions of higher education and research staff in order to ensure that fair working conditions, decent salary and permanent contractual status of the academics are respected and ensured while working within the European Universities alliances.

⁷ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017): Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff – 2017. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.